INSIDE AMERICA'S SCHOOLS: A SPECIAL REPORT

DECEMBER 16, 1991 · $2.95

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

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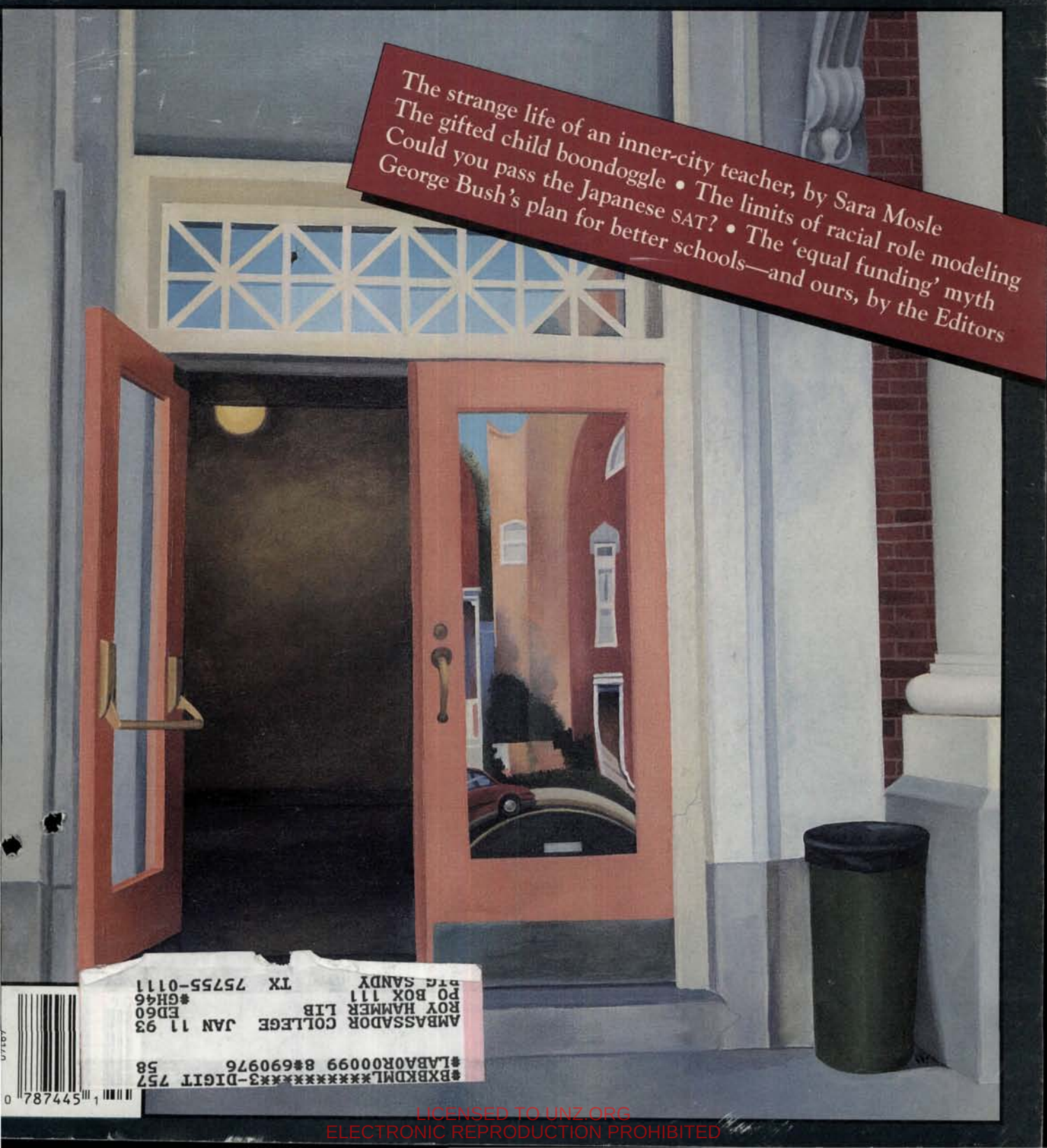

The strange life of an inner-city teacher, by Sara Mosle
The gifted child boondoggle • The limits of racial role modeling
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George Bush's plan for better schools—and ours, by the Editors

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# CORRESPONDENCE

## Grunt

**To the editors:**

Cynthia Wright's portrait of "sexism" in the Air Force ("G.I. Jill," October 21) is the sort of squishy propaganda one expects to find on the op-ed page of some half-baked campus newspaper. Without the tag at the end of the piece, I'd have had no idea she was in the military.

First she documents an instance of a female midshipman's being handcuffed to a urinal and photographed in said position. As hazing goes, this is mild stuff—were it to happen to a male, it wouldn't even warrant mention amid the more serious traumas. Although the Air Force is notorious for its lax standards, it does not tell its female officers that success lies in wearing "a skirt and a nice pair of pumps." In my experience those female officers who succeed do so because they are about as competent and professional as any of their male counterparts. Most wear no makeup during duty hours because it's inconvenient. All wear their hair to conform to regulation 670-1, which states: "Hair will be neatly groomed and will not present an extreme, ragged, or unkempt appearance. Hair will not extend below the bottom edge of the collar nor be cut so short as to appear unfeminine." This bears little resemblance to her statement that the regulation requires that "military women style their hair so as 'to present a feminine appearance.' "

Ms. Wright then cites a "recent survey" in which 64 percent of military women complained of "on-the-job harassment" versus 30 to 40 percent of civilians as further proof of rampant sexual harassment. This is hilarious. Instances of "on-the-job" harassment in the military are far more frequent than this "survey" indicates. My superiors are *legally* entitled to "harass" me if they deem it necessary. This includes standing me to attention, getting within four centimeters of my face, and screaming abuse at me. Harassment, as polite society understands it, is as integral to the military as the uniform itself.

The point is that there is such a thing as military culture. The military has its own code of conduct, its own manner of dress, its own class structure, its own standards of success and failure, even its own language. And all of this is codified and backed up with the force of law. Of course this sort of cultural uniformity offends the liberal's sensibilities; but it explains why the military is the only truly integrated institution in America. It demands assimilation. Black culture, white culture, female "culture" are all subordinated, at least during duty hours, beneath this military culture. It is a performance-oriented environment where the price of failure is largely created by dead white European males. To which I say, so what? The system exists solely to succeed in war, not to self-actualize the likes of Cynthia Wright.

BRADLEY J. SEALY
*Fort Richardson, Arkansas*

The writer is a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army.

**To the editors:**

After reading Cynthia Wright's comments regarding sexism in today's military, I began to reminisce about my days in the "New Navy" of the 1970s. During boot camp, instructors would often employ terminology associated with female genitalia as a memory device for male recruits. After folding a pair of regulation skivvies into a tidy little square, for example, one was confronted with the problem of how to stow it properly. To do so incorrectly would result in having the entire contents of one's locker dumped onto the deck. What was a young, libidinous recruit to do? Easy. Just remember that the fold in the side was called the "pussy," and "pussy goes to the left." Another example: my rifle was not known to me as a "weapon" to be stored in a "rack" or "locker"; it was a "piece" and was stored in the "whorehouse." Ten years later, my brother attended Marine Corps boot camp where all women were referred to as "Suzie Rotten Crotch."

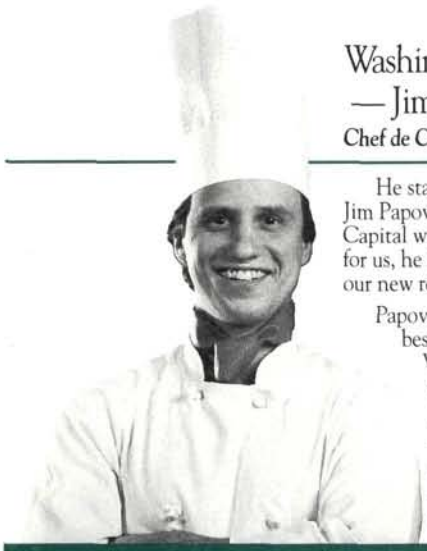
DAVID L. SUTTON
*Auburn, Alabama*

## Hippity-hop

**To the editors:**

David Samuels's "The Rap On Rap" (November 11) is a clumsily executed essay replete with errors and misjudgments that only highlight his sadly limited knowledge of the subject.

It wouldn't take much research to discover that African-American rappers Run-DMC sold more than 1 million copies of *King of Rock* and more than 3 million copies of *Raising Hell* before white rappers The Beastie Boys even released *Licensed To Ill*—thus nullifying Mr. Samuels's statement that the Beasties LP "became the first rap record to sell a million copies." Mr. Samuels misquotes Ice Cube's lyrics (the line should read, "Word, yo, but who the fuck is *herb*). And

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he claims that early rap records *The Message* and *White Lines* were "transparent attempts to sell records to whites" that had a "less favorable" reception on "the street." The fact is that most Old School artists had little expectation of a white audience for their music, and, as a friend who was living on 135th Street in Harlem at the time recalls, one "couldn't walk two feet" without hearing those records in black neighborhoods.

Most people in hip-hop—the artists, the industry, and the critics—are glad that young white kids are listening to the music because it means the hip-hop agenda is having an impact on an important segment of this society, and it means more money ends up in the artists' pockets, which is unquestionably good for the health of the music. While there is validity to the notion that the white audience for rap music is increasing—and that record labels are interested in selling their product to this audience—Mr. Samuels takes faulty and dangerous leaps in logic in a hollow attempt to make his point.

He claims, for example, that "the selling of [black] authenticity to a young white audience is the stock-in-trade of *The Source*," which contradicts something I remember explaining to him when he interviewed me (and if I didn't, he should have asked before making this assertion): *The Source*'s readership—probably mirroring rap music's listenership—is more than half African American, about 45 percent white, and the rest Asian, Latin, and others.

Rap is getting more popular in the young black *and* white communities, and to imply that only white kids are listening to NWA, for example, ignores the black communities of countless cities such as Houston, Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland that are blasting gangsta records like NWA and The GETO Boys from their jeeps daily.

JON SHECTER
*New York, New York*

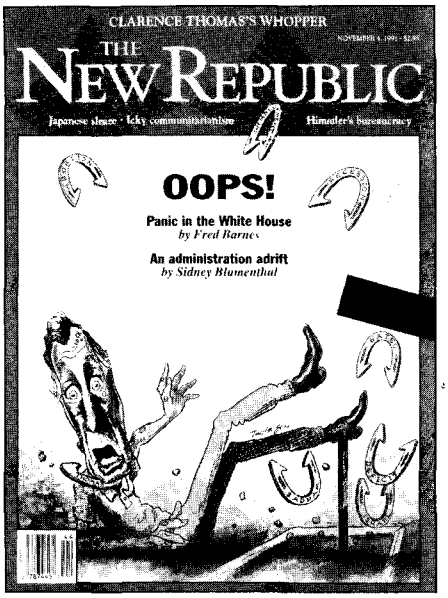
The writer is editor in chief of *The Source*.

**David Samuels replies:**

That *The Message* was hated on the street is a direct quote from Def Jam Records President Russell Simmons, corroborated by other industry sources. Perhaps if we knew who Mr. Shecter's "friend living on 135th Street" was, we could judge his credibility as well.

The statement that the Beastie Boys were the first rap group to sell 1 million copies was made by Bill Adler, publicist for both Run-DMC and the Beastie Boys. I checked this against a chart in Mr. Shecter's own magazine, *The Source* (Jan.-Feb. 1990). The chart also states that the Beasties eventually sold more than 4 million albums.

## Mouths of babes




**To the editors:**

My wife and I choose our words carefully when speaking about America's political leaders because we do not wish to color our child's perceptions about the Washington establishment prematurely. Our son is a 6-year-old with no known interest in Beltway politics or in cultural punditry. So you can imagine our wonder and delight when after breakfast one day he noticed the November 4 cover of TNR, studied it briefly, and then asked, "Daddy, who is this wimp?"

VICTOR LIPSKI
*New Haven, Connecticut*

## Bye-bye Dalai

**To the editors:**

Jim Holt's piece "Hello Dalai" (November 11) had a great many offensive and ill-informed remarks about His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. Mr. Holt described the Dalai Lama's English during a public address recently given in New York City as "fairly wonky." English is not the Dalai Lama's first language, and he usually speaks through a Tibetan translator. But on those occasions when he does speak in English, he makes his best effort. For Mr. Holt to refer to the Dalai Lama as "a bit of a holy bore, if not fraud" is an insult to the traditions of Tibetan civilization. The Dalai Lama spent eighteen years in rigorous scholastic training to receive his Geshe degree, the Tibetan equivalent of a Doctorate of Theology. Throughout his life he has pursued a serious interest in science and has begun a series of dialogues with Western physicists, neurobiologists, and cognitive psychologists, which is not, as Mr. Holt writes, merely "putting around his garden and tinkering with his mechanical gadgets." Had Mr. Holt bothered to do any additional research, he would have learned of the Dalai Lama's courageous leadership of the Tibetan refugee community in India; of his thirty-two-year campaign to bring international attention to the genocide, population transfer, torture, cultural suppression, and environmental crises in Tibet since the Chinese occupation in 1950; of his addresses before the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament; of the many international citations and awards he has received, including the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize; of the monastic discipline of his daily life, which perhaps Mr. Holt would belittle because it belongs to a religious culture that is not European. Mr. Holt's attempts to satirize the audience of 6,000 people who came to hear the Dalai Lama speak in New York also showed a kind of intolerance and ignorance that I am not accustomed to reading in your magazine.

MAURA MOYNIHAN
*Washington, D.C.*

## Smell of calumny

**To the editors:**

Barry Edelstein singles out the irony of Senator Alan Simpson's defense of Judge Clarence Thomas ("MacBluff," November 11) with lines from Iago, surely the most poisonous racist in Shakespeare. But he fails to mention Anita Hill's parallel in Shakespeare, Angelo's victim, Isabel, in *Measure for Measure*.

Pleading for her brother's life before the inflexible magistrate, Isabel gradually realizes that he is offering pardon in exchange for sex. Astonished she turns on him:

> I will proclaim thee, Angelo.... I'll tell the world aloud what man thou art.

To which Angelo coolly replies:

> Who will believe thee, Isabel?...
> My vouch against you, and my place i'th'state
> Will so your accusation overweigh.
> That you shall stifle in your own report,
> And smell of calumny.

HILARY THIMMESH
*Collegeville, Minnesota*

The writer is president emeritus of St. John's University.

**To the editors:**

Shame on Barry Edelstein for overlooking:

> Clarence is come, false, fleeting perjured Clarence ...

from Act I of *Richard III*.

DONALD FOSS JR.
*Oregon City, Oregon*

*continued on page 53*



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## FROM WASHINGTON

## Race unconscious

On the evening of November 20, the Bush administration was in the midst of its latest flip flop flap. Late that afternoon, White House counsel C. Boyden Gray had issued a directive ordering termination of "any regulation, rule, enforcement practice ... that mandates, encourages, or otherwise involves the use of quotas, preferences, set-asides, or other similar devices, on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." By the next morning, when President Bush was supposed to sign it along with the 1991 Civil Rights Act, the directive itself had been terminated.

While the lights were burning late in the White House, the president himself was at a Bush-Quayle fund-raiser elsewhere in town. It brought in $1.2 million. *The Washington Post*'s reporter interviewed one of the guests, a businessman named Joshua Smith, who claimed to have sold $90,000 worth of tickets to fellow African Americans. The Republican "agenda is an economic one, not a social agenda," Smith told the *Post*. Here, presumably, was one of those blacks we keep hearing about, who—tired of the Democrats' redistributionist policies like affirmative action—are returning to the party of Abraham Lincoln.

Who is Joshua Smith? He is the founder of one of the largest black-owned companies in America. It supplies computer services, primarily to the U.S. government. Started in 1978 with $15,000 in capital, it grew by 1989 to $54 million in revenue and 1,100 employees. Key to Smith's success was the 8(a) "set-aside" program of the Small Business Administration, which reserves a certain percentage of government contracts for minority-owned businesses, saving them the tedium of competitive bidding.

One of the less appealing justifications for affirmative action is that it will force-feed a black professional class, which will absorb and pass along values appropriate to its station. In Joshua Smith's case, this seems to have happened. He's even become a Republican. Maybe that is why the 1988 Republican Party platform interrupts its general attacks on reverse discrimination to promise, "We will increase, strengthen, and reinvigorate minority business development efforts" like 8(a) set-asides.

Nevertheless, Boyden Gray was absolutely right that government affirmative action programs make a mockery of President Bush's long campaign against "quotas" in the 1991 Civil Rights Act. For two years Bush argued that tiny nuances of language in the bill might—in a strong breeze on alternate Tuesdays if the moon was full—incline private employers to practice reverse discrimination rather than risk civil rights lawsuits. Meanwhile, Bush presides over an elaborate and often overt reverse discrimination apparatus, of which 8(a) is just one example.

Someone at the Environmental Protection Agency recently sent me a thick pile of bureaucrap relating to the EPA's affirmative action machinery over the past few years. It is fascinating. One choice item is a letter to the chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission—one Clarence Thomas—expressing the EPA's commitment to "specific targets for the hiring and promotion of protected group members." And here we have a handy chart, titled "Affirmative Action Goals." Across the top are the various categories: black male, black female, etc. Down the left side are job levels, professional down to clerical. A grid then provides numbers amazing in their profusion and specificity. For example the goal for black males at the administrative level is 14.1 percent. The goal for Asian American/Pacific Islanders of the female persuasion in clerical rank is 2.3 percent. And so on.

Most of this is mandated by the "Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures," which apply to both government agencies and private organizations doing business with the government. The guidelines require extensive sexual and ethnic record-keeping and, if the numbers are inadequate, a "results oriented affirmative action plan ... which in design and execution may be race, color, sex, or ethnic 'conscious.' To be sure, the guidelines declare that affirmative action "should not ... require the selection of persons on the basis of race, color, sex," etc. But anyone whose own government career or contract was at stake would be nuts not to make hiring and promotion decisions on exactly that basis.

Affirmative action has roots going

*continued on page 53*


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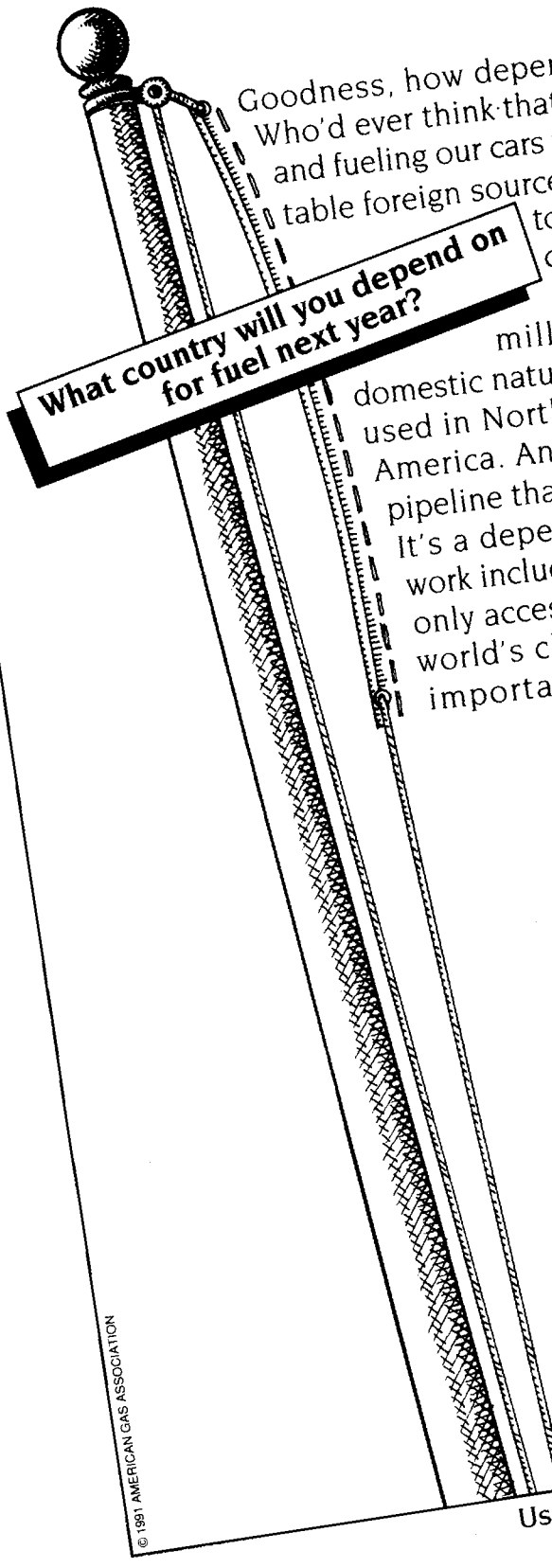

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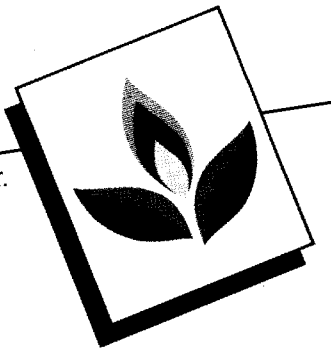

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

DECEMBER 16, 1991

# SCHOOL HAZE

Back in April, when George Bush and Education Secretary Lamar Alexander unveiled their "America 2000" plan, most commentators wearily dismissed it as a political exercise. The plan celebrated the politically attractive but practically unrealistic idea of choice and made much noise about standards, but it failed to provide significant new funding for existing schools or new programs. The president, it seemed readily apparent, was seeking to "inoculate" himself against infection by yet another domestic issue about which he cared little but that made him vulnerable to Democratic criticism. Gary Orfield, an education professor at the University of Chicago, summed up the prevailing consensus when he said, "America 2000 is not a plan for American education but a plan for re-electing the president."

There are, to be sure, political motives at play. And the substantive aspects of "America 2000" are so buried in public relations gloss and euphemistic education-speak that it's easy to overlook them entirely. But the dismissal of the White House proposal has been far too glib, especially where it comes from those, like Senator Edward Kennedy, whose own reform alternatives range from stale to nonexistent. The president's plan is neither as wide-ranging nor as courageous as the one we'd like to see. It contains, however, some good ideas, which is more than can be said for its congressional opponents.

The strongest aspect of "America 2000" is its emphasis on standards and testing. Mr. Alexander wants to promulgate a set of national criteria for what students at various levels should know. He wants to assess their progress, and that of their schools, by means of a national achievement test in five "core" subjects. As a bow to those on the right who consider any national restrictions on the local protectorate of education anathema, these examinations would be officially "voluntary." In reality, however, they would become more or less required as colleges and employers came to rely upon them, as the plan suggests.

This is an appealing idea for several reasons. Objective national standards would serve as a counterweight to the low-cal curriculum that exists in many school districts. If high school seniors are going to be tested on geography, math, and history, classes based on self-esteem and "how to think" will accordingly evolve in a more substantive direction. Opponents of testing often draw the analogy that you don't make someone a better jumper by raising the hurdles. This sounds like common sense, but it's actually nonsense. So long as there aren't any insurmountable obstacles, people respond to incentives. Students learn in order to pass tests, because they want a high school diploma. Barbara Lerner, an educational assessment expert, has argued persuasively that minimum competency testing, which caught on in the late 1970s, is largely responsible for raising the literacy rate of black high school graduates from less than 20 percent in 1975 to nearly 100 percent today. This makes testing one of the few demonstrably effective reforms of the last quarter century.

Secretary Alexander's plan would also promote accountability by issuing report cards for schools,



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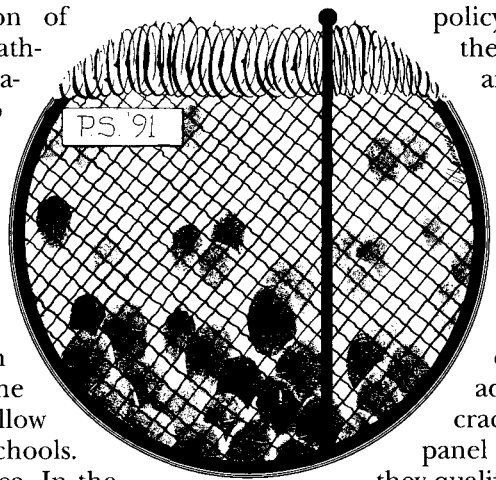
school districts, and states. This too is a good idea; it would help wake up parents to the reality that it isn't just somebody else's school that is inadequate, but their own. It would instill competitive pressure throughout school systems. There is, unfortunately, one kind of testing that is missing from the plan: evaluation and recertification of teachers. The Department of Education's Diane Ravitch argues that you can't make demands on what teachers should know until you decide what their students should have to learn. In fact, demonstrably incompetent teachers are an enormous barrier to educational progress.

This omission is attributable to the still-firm grip of the teachers' unions and educational bureaucrats who reject anything that smacks of competency testing. Elsewhere, however, America 2000 is not without ideas for recruiting better teachers, and rewarding the good ones. The plan supports merit pay, which remains objectionable to the National Education Association, and alternate certification of teachers and principals, which is anathema to the nation's powerful education colleges. The educrats are also opposed to Mr. Alexander's idea of creating 535 experimental "New American Schools," a project for which the administration actually wants to provide new money and the Democrats in Congress don't.




Where the Bush plan falls short, in our opinion, is in its genuflection at the altar of voucher choice, the idea of allowing public money to follow students to private and parochial schools. Choice is a superficially alluring idea. In theory it applies market pressure to inadequate schools, forcing them to shape up, or close down. In practice, however, it's far from clear that school districts, which will always be far from free markets, will respond to this kind of pressure. It's far more likely to dilute even further the notion of universal public education, without allowing more modest reform ideas a chance to work. And once the public schools are gone, there will be little chance of convincing taxpayers to bring them back.

The response from congressional Democrats has been even more hollow than one might expect. Senator Kennedy, chairman of the Labor and Human Resources Committee, wants to nuke the whole plan. Mr. Kennedy opposes the idea of new experimental schools, national standards, testing, and almost everything else. The senator is, of course, in a double bind. He is both a captive of the educational establishment, which is more than happy with the status quo, and chagrined that the president might have seized the initiative on a long-held Democratic monopoly.

The one issue on which the congressional Democrats are clearly right is a familiar one. One of the president's stated goals is to have all children start school "ready to learn" by the year 2000, a goal only imaginable because of the success of the Head Start program. Yet despite promises to do so, Mr. Bush has not pushed for full funding for eligible 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds.

But elsewhere, the Democrats are on weaker ground. Mr. Kennedy's version of the bill, which Mr. Bush has threatened to veto, would make federal funds available only in the form of block grants. Where Mr. Alexander wants to condition federal aid on meaningful reform, Mr. Kennedy wants to make it available for any sort of vague "restructuring" project a school district undertakes, including purely bureaucratic reorganization. There is a certain amount of irony here. Through the 1970s and '80s, it was always Republicans who insisted that education was a local rather than a federal concern and resisted efforts to provide funds only for specific programs. Ronald Reagan wanted to abolish the Department of Education. Now that the Republicans have latched on to specific reform ideas and have breathed a bit of life into federal education policy, it's the Democrats who insist that the department should be restrained and that federal dollars should flow unrestricted.

And of course Mr. Kennedy wants more unrestricted funds—$160 million more—despite the dismal lack of results generated by the massive hike of unfocused education spending during the 1980s. He would also siphon off more federal aid for administrative costs and add to the bloated education bureaucracy by creating a new federal advisory panel to review state reform plans to see if they qualify for funds. Reviewing such plans is, as Mr. Alexander asserts, properly the job of the Department of Education.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of this entire debate, however, is not the shallowness of the Democratic response or the political opportunism of the administration's proposals, but the utilitarianism of both sides. We're for many of the reforms outlined—and in favor of more money for them than this administration is prepared to spend. But we're somewhat troubled by the rationale. The White House and congressional Democrats—along with any columnist or governor you care to mention—are fixated on the economic impact of education reform. We don't doubt, of course, that this is related to an important truth: that better education is essential to our economic competitiveness. And we don't doubt that this argument is important for marketing purposes, as the corporate types surrounding Secretary Alexander are surely pointing out. But in America, education has never been simply about economics. The case for better schools is rooted in the needs of our civil as well as our economic culture. It should be based not on the claims of consumers, but on the need for better citizens. And the urgency of reform these days springs primarily from the latter.



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# UNCIVIL RITES

Conservatives argued for years that the problem with liberals was that they relied on an activist Supreme Court for victories they were unable to win in Congress. Last week President Bush fell into the same unfortunate habit. The civil rights bill and the attempt to lift the gag rule on abortion were introduced to overrule conservative Supreme Court decisions that ironically claimed to be deferring to the "original intention" of Congress. In both cases, Congress said the Court got its intention wrong. And in both cases, Mr. Bush refused to enforce the laws as written, even after Congress tried to make its intention clear.

The question in the abortion debate was what Congress intended when it passed the Family Planning Act of 1970. The purpose of the act (according to the preamble) is to "make readily available information on family planning." But in 1988 a pro-life Reagan aide wrote a regulation that said the act was intended to ban federally financed clinics from discussing abortion. Deferring to his "expertise," the Court upheld the regulation last spring. Majorities in both houses of Congress immediately said they intended nothing of the sort, and tried to lift the gag rule, but Mr. Bush vetoed. The moral is that conservative federal agencies can ignore or rewrite their statutory mandates, unless two-thirds of both houses agree to stop them.

The civil rights bill, similarly, was introduced to overrule a series of recent Supreme Court decisions interpreting the Civil Rights Act of 1964. After attacking the measure as a "quota bill," Mr. Bush caved on the central point and agreed to shift the burden of proving discrimination back from the employee to the employer. To remedy this, administration lawyers are now claiming they acquiesced to a "killer provision" in the bill that, although clearly framed by Democrats to endorse affirmative action, will be read by them—and the Court—to strike down all means of affirmative action. (See "Last Laugh" by Fred Barnes, below.) To add insult to injury, on the eve of the signing, C. Boyden Gray, Mr. Bush's legal adviser, went one step further. He tried to achieve by executive fiat what he had failed to achieve in Congress, and instructed federal agencies to end affirmative action. (See "Race Unconscious," TRB, page 4.) Although Mr. Bush disavowed the order, he signed a "signing statement" written by Mr. Gray. It tells agencies to follow an interpretation of the law that Congress had rejected, but that a handful of Republican senators placed in the *Congressional Record* as part of its "legislative history."

Both moves are particularly cynical. The first is simply a bid to get Congress to enact a law that's clearly against its intention. The second is a more fundamental breach of the principles of judicial restraint. In the past, Mr. Bush's lawyers have repeatedly endorsed Justice Antonin Scalia's view that judges should *ignore* legislative history since it's easily manipulated by special interests and rarely reflects the views of a majority of Congress. But despite his emphasis on the text of a bill, Justice Scalia is reluctant to enforce Congress's intentions unless there are no ambiguities—an unrealistic proposition. The upshot is that in conflicts with the new executive/judicial axis, Congress will lose one way or another.

This is hardly good news for principled conservatives. Contempt for original intention in statutory interpretation is hard to reconcile with respect for original intention in constitutional interpretation. And it's ironic that the "strict constructionist" president and Supreme Court are conspiring to prevent the people's representatives in Congress from enacting their will into law, either by legislative mischief or by judicial and executive fiat. Excuse us, but wasn't that the problem with the Warren Court?

## NOTEBOOK

BUSHISM OF THE WEEK: "I don't want to just sit here blaming Congress. I mean, we're all in this together." —President Bush, November 20, to news anchor Bill Stuart of KCNC-TV, Denver

"I think the Congress should be blamed." —several minutes later, to Warner Saunders of WMAQ-TV, Chicago •

## WHITE HOUSE WATCH

# LAST LAUGH

*By Fred Barnes*

C. Boyden Gray, the White House legal counsel and foe of racial quotas, is blamed for bungling negotiations on the new Civil Rights Act. President Bush was forced to settle for a bill that, by nearly all accounts, contained more of what Democrats and the civil rights lobby had sought, and less of what Bush wanted. Gray, in an op-ed piece in *The Washington Post*, insisted that Bush had gotten the better of the deal, but few believed him. Then Gray tried to get Bush to invoke presidential authority to eliminate the government's program of racial quotas, preferences, and set-asides. That blew up in Gray's (and Bush's) face. The president, confronted with an angry protest by black leaders and Republican Senator Jack Danforth of Missouri, split publicly with Gray. When he signed the bill on November 21, Bush declared his support for "the government's affirmative action program." Gray dutifully fell on his



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sword, saying he'd made a mistake.

He wasn't as crestfallen as he appeared—and for good reason. Rather than protect quotas and other affirmative action devices used by government and the private sector, the bill may wipe out these employment practices. Of course the White House won't say this, for fear of alienating black leaders with whom Bush desires cordial relations. I doubt Bush really understands the bill's potential for undermining race-based or gender-based preferences. But Gray and other White House officials do. The bill's anti-preference language prompted Gray to launch his direct attack on affirmative action. That upset Bush's plan for a friendly ceremony for signing the new bill. Now the attack will be indirect.

The key provision that emboldened Gray didn't spark public debate. It says: "An unlawful employment practice is established when the complaining party demonstrates that race, color, religion, sex, or national origin was a motivating factor for any employment practice, even though other factors also motivated the practice." Gray didn't draw attention to the provision. In fact, it wasn't in the administration's civil rights proposal this year. Democrats and civil rights leaders put it in, even though it appears to outlaw employment bias in favor of blacks and women as readily as it bars bias against them.

Women's groups and feminists favored it because it nullified the Supreme Court's 1989 decision in *Price Waterhouse* v. *Hopkins*. The ruling involved a company that declined to promote a woman to partner in the firm, at least partly because of sex stereotyping. The company, wrote Justice William Brennan, "may avoid a finding of liability only by proving ... that it would have made the same decision even if it had not taken the [woman's] gender into account." This created a "but for" requirement: she'd have gotten the promotion but for sexist bias. The provision eliminates that requirement. Now if race or gender bias plays any part in an employment decision, that's sufficient to make it unlawful.

White House officials spotted the provision as a time bomb from the beginning of the civil rights fight in 1990. After Bush vetoed the Democratic bill last year, he sent up his own civil rights legislation. It included the provision. His 1991 bill left it out but only because business lobbyists opposed it. They thought it might make corporate affirmative action programs, long established as part of America's business culture, illegal. The White House was eager to keep the business community on board, especially if the president vetoed the Democratic bill again (he didn't). So the killer provision was dropped, only to reappear in the bill Bush signed, thanks ironically to the Democrats.

Jeff McGuiness, a business lobbyist with the Labor Policy Association, says he discussed the provision with a White House official. Standing alone, it means affirmative action is "dead," he said. "You're right," the official answered. On the other hand, Democratic drafters of the civil rights bill didn't take the provision's threat to affirmative action seriously. The drafters believed they maintained a delicate balance fostering strict nondiscrimination without jeopardizing affirmative action. Maybe they did, but maybe not.

To spotlight the threat, the Labor Policy Association commissioned a study, which reported that "a number of significant advantages flow" from affirmative action. The provision threatens "the entire process by making it unlawful for employers to take race or gender into account," it said. "Affirmative action is, by definition, race and gender conscious. To the degree that affirmative steps need to be taken to ensure equal opportunities for women and minorities, race and sex inevitably will be a motivating factor in the steps taken."

To protect affirmative action, the final bill has a "saving clause" that may not save anything. It says: "Nothing in the amendments made by this title shall be construed to affect court-ordered remedies, affirmative action, or conciliation agreements, that are in accordance with the law." But the bill gives no definition of affirmative action, and the "in accordance with the law" language is vague too. It can be read as referring to the provision banning any consideration of race or gender. Skeptics of the potency of the provision note that the 1964 Civil Rights Act barred quotas but that they emerged anyway. That was because a liberal Supreme Court allowed them to. Now there's a conservative Court inclined to rely on the language of legislation (as in the killer provision) and ignore ambiguous caveats (the saving clause).

Gray clearly overreached in proposing an announcement by Bush, to be delivered at the signing ceremony for the civil rights bill, to end government programs using race and gender in employment decisions. His draft was scrapped when civil rights leaders and Danforth said they'd boycott the ceremony if Bush stuck with Gray's plan. The offending sentence in the draft was this: "Any regulation, rule, enforcement practice, or other aspect of these programs that mandates, encourages, or otherwise involves the use of quotas, preferences, set-asides, or other similar devices, on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, is to be terminated as soon as is legally feasible."

Yet these practices may be terminated anyway. For one thing, the Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures, promulgated in 1978, must be revised in light of the new bill. And the White House was careful not to say that it wants affirmative action in all its forms to pass muster. Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater said the Gray draft had created a misunderstanding, namely that Bush would undercut the bill by axing affirmative action. "Let me be clear," Fitzwater told reporters. "The president supports affirmative action, preferences, and minority set-asides as long as they are consistent with the new civil rights law, period." What follows is that these practices will be jettisoned if they're not consistent. Fitzwater left that unstated.

Bush made one seemingly compromising statement at the ceremony. "Nothing in this bill overturns the government's affirmative action programs." I'm told the word "overturns" was used as synonymous with "abolish." In other words, the bill doesn't instantly knock off those



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programs. That comes later, when the employment guidelines are reviewed, or when disgruntled parties or conservative plaintiff's groups challenge employment practices relying on race or gender in court, resting their case on the killer provision.

The president gave plaintiffs other ammunition. In a written statement largely ignored by the press, Bush endorsed as part of the bill's legislative history an interpretation by Senate Republican leader Bob Dole and other senators (not Danforth). The Dole memo "will be treated as authoritative interpretive guidance by all officials in the executive branch," Bush said. The Equal Employment Advisory Council, a business group favoring corporate affirmative action programs, concluded that the memo "makes three disturbing references to potential affirmative action liability." It allows damages "in cases challenging unlawful affirmative action plans, quotas, and other preferences." It specifically does not codify two Supreme Court rulings that permitted preferences. And it says the killer provision "is equally applicable to cases involving challenges to unlawful affirmative action plans, quotas, and other preferences."

After the ceremony, civil rights leaders—Benjamin Hooks, Joseph Lowery, John Jacob, and several others—sought to meet with Bush, but he palmed them off on Vice President Dan Quayle. They denounced Gray and his effort to eliminate affirmative action. Quayle tried to soothe them, and they left happier than when they entered. Naturally Quayle didn't mention the killer provision. If it works the way the White House expects, they'll learn of its impact soon enough. •

**VUKOVAR POSTCARD**

# THE DEAD

*By Anna Husarska*

"My name is Colonel Mile Susnjar from the Yugoslav National Army and I welcome you on board of this bus. Here is the schedule of our journalistic tour: our destiny is the liberated town of Vukovar. On the road you will be shown some proofs of atrocities committed by the Ustasha fascists [Croats] as we will be informing you on details necessary for your truthful reporting." At that point Colonel Susnjar, the man who has been refusing journalists the permits to go to Vukovar for some days, put a broad smile on his face and went down the aisle of the bus distributing reporters' notebooks marked JNA, the initials of the Yugoslav National Army. He also gave out JNA ballpoint pens, which happened to be produced in Zagreb, capital of Croatia.

The news that day in the Belgrade press center was a wire story that a Serbian photographer stringing for Reuters had seen the bodies of forty-one Serbian children massacred by the Croatians. Most journalists, pressed by their papers back home, naturally wanted to go and see the evidence. We were told that this was impossible for the moment but that pathologists would report on the autopsy results and we would be kept informed. Meanwhile we had to stick to our schedule. That same evening Reuters retracted its story.

The point of the tour was to prove how the destruction and deaths in Vukovar were not, in fact, the work of the Serbian-dominated "Yugoslav" army, which had shelled the Serbo-Croat town for the previous three months. They were instead the work of Croatian fascists—or "Ustashas"—who had wrought havoc in a town just "liberated" by the Serbs. Thus, the Serbian propaganda machine, having laid waste to this town for months, added desecration to devastation.

Our first stop was the military barracks on the outskirts of Vukovar, where we were invited to ask questions so that the "heroic soldiers who liberated the town from the Ustasha fascists" could tell us how they "prevented the genocide of the Serbian civilian population." On the way upstairs where the press conference was to be held the soldier walking in front of me dropped his hand grenade. It came bumping down the stairs between my feet. His smile and reassurance ("*nema problema*") almost calmed me, but I lit a cigarette anyhow at a safe distance from the cases with ammunition in the corridor. Huge empty artillery shells that were standing in the hall came in handy as vertical ashtrays, like the kind you see in hotel corridors. Soldiers circulated with trays of plastic beakers serving tea to 150 journalists as the colonels dispensed their information about the "Goebbels-like machinery of Croat fascist propaganda." At one point a very strong explosion in the vicinity made the interpreter lose her train of thought about "the secessionists supported by their mentors who tried to impose their solution by force," using Vukovar, "the Ustasha fortress where fascism started," as their stronghold.

Throughout the eighty-six days of the siege by the Yugoslav National Army, the whole world has seen reports from the Croatian town of Vukovar. Like the Spanish town Guernica bombarded by the German Condor Legion in 1937 or Dresden punished with air raids by the RAF during World War II, Vukovar became a sadly famous addition to our knowledge of the geography of tragedies. On November 18, after the Croatian defenders ran out of ammunition, the town fell. The television pictures prepared us for the worst, but what one sees in Vukovar now is worse than the worst. (I know this does not make sense, but so it is.) And one thing the camera cannot convey is the smell of death, of the decomposing dead animals and corpses of people still lying in the streets, of the burnt houses and of wet rubble.

Our genial tour of hell took us to the center of the



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town that was once inhabited by 50,000 people and was a charming tourist attraction on the banks of the Danube. The bus stopped next to two dead pigs and one cow, and we were invited to see the underground hiding place where the fascists watched porno movies. Colonel Miodrag Panic, one of the commanders in the Vukovar operations, led us to a basement room where it was so dark we could see almost nothing. A British colleague managed to decipher on the wall some "Heil Hitler" graffiti, doubtless scrawled by some clumsy public relations specialists for the Serbians. (The Serbian government had already approached Saatchi and Saatchi to improve its public image.) I saw only a table with a flowerpot. Colonel Miodrag Starcevic, the legal adviser of the Yugoslav Defense Ministry, said we could not be shown the movies that the fascists were so keen on because Vukovar has no electricity. Attempts to speak with women cleaning up the fallen pieces of roof nearby were interrupted by our Cicerone: it is dangerous to walk around because of the land mines still lying all over the town, he said.

Outside the hospital, across the street in an orchard, lay four or five rows of bodies in different states of decomposition. In the yard of the house next door, another thirty bodies. It was raining that day and the bodies were lying in the open air. A completely black burnt corpse, its head split, was spattered with the rain from the remaining part of the roof.

The evacuation of the wounded was under way, supervised by the International Red Cross. We started asking Nicolas Borsinger, the Red Cross's Swiss delegate, about the fate of the wounded Croatians, but the colonels wanted us to continue with the schedule and the buses started honking. I got angry at one of them for rushing us and asked what was so urgent in our schedule. "You shall see," he said, in a tone more appropriate for a surprise birthday party.

We drove through the center of the town. In the park outside the church, virtually every tree had been mutilated with gun shots; some quite sturdy trunks had been demolished. Every little road sign I saw had some twenty to fifty bullet holes, and on the facade of each house every few inches there was another pock-mark. The paint and the outside concrete stucco had simply fallen away. The empty streets had been turned into narrow paths among the rubble. At one point a crippled car blocked the road. The side of the car looked like a colander. There was not one pane in the windows, only torn white curtains floating in the rain and wind. The arcades of the main street looked like a toothless mouth, with empty cavities where once there were colorful souvenir boutiques.

It was very difficult to imagine what the town had looked like before. Here again our hosts were helpful. They drove us to the half-destroyed building of the Dunav hotel. A British colleague was telling us about the corpses he saw in the neighboring street when someone joked nervously that since we were to be taken to a hotel we should be served a nice lunch. Some laughed to relieve the tension. The laughter gave way to horror when we entered the restaurant space of the hotel: tables were set for us, with mineral water, Coke, forks, knives, and plates, and on the white tablecloth were displayed a few dozen Vukovar postcards: the hotel, the town hall, and one mosaic-like with the name "VUKOVAR" written on it. It felt as strange as "Greetings from Auschwitz" would.

The officers gave us the final speech. Major Veselin Sljivancanin told us that there is no human right that the Croat fascists did not violate, and that we were brought here so that we would behave as professionals and remember how the town of Vukovar looked after the Ustashas had been here. Meanwhile soldiers were circulating with trays of glasses with cognac. Behind the sheet hanging in the window to protect us from the pouring rain on a terrace, among the broken white garden chairs, lay an open accordion.

"Why is Croatian fascism supported by international public opinion?" asked one of the officers, and he expressed the hope that our tour of Vukovar gave us sufficient proof of the fascist crimes so that we would now write the truth and nothing but the truth. "Why doesn't the international press write about the massacres of the Serbian children, about the necklaces that the Ustashas are making with cut-off fingers of murdered Serbian children?" he went on. We were served hot beans with bacon. The ghoulish banquet had a journalistic aspect: the beans were served by Serbian journalists.

As we were leaving I picked up from the floor of the lobby a brochure on Vukovar. It had a little map of the area, with two other tourist attractions in the vicinity: Osijek and Vincovci. The next day the speculations in the press center were whether the Yugoslav National Army would next attack the former or the latter.

ANNA HUSARSKA is a frequent contributor to TNR.

**The case for single-sex schools.**

# ROMEBOYS

*By Michael McGough*

Central Catholic High School is a red-brick Gothic fortress whose towers shadow and shame the ugly modern buildings that flank it on Pittsburgh's Fifth Avenue. Central, as it is known to graduates (like me) and non-graduates alike, is out of place in another sense: it is the only all-boys' Catholic high school left in Pittsburgh, its football and debating rivals of old having long ago transformed themselves into coeducational institu-



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tions. Partly because Central's ubiquitous alumni want it that way, the school has a good chance of resisting the coeducational zeitgeist for the foreseeable future. Even so, this school that looks like a museum runs the risk of becoming one: a living museum for the single-sex schooling that once was as familiar a part of the Catholic ethos as clerical celibacy or the Latin Mass.

Until recently there were two citadels of all-male secondary education in America: Catholic schools like Central and the Protestant-pedigreed boarding schools of New England and their imitators in the hinterland. Following the lead of Ivy League colleges, the latter started admitting girls some time ago. Now that the Catholics are seeing the light, boys' schools are a distinctly endangered species. I find that sad, for reasons that I hope transcend nostalgia and a fondness for coming-of-age novels set at prep schools. (Coeducation has yet to produce its *A Separate Peace.)* There is a case for boys' schools. Unfortunately, it's a modest one, and modest cases can be easily overwhelmed by more powerful forces, including economics, ideology, and a foolish consistency in legal reasoning.

The decline of single-sex Catholic schools has something to do with larger trends in Catholicism, including changing views of sex and of sex roles. With the arrival of puberty, many American Catholic schoolchildren of my generation were shepherded from a coeducational grammar school to a single-sex high school. Like my mother before them, two of my sisters passed from Sacred Heart (coeducational) Grade School to Sacred Heart (girls') High School. Like my father and, later, my brothers, I moved on to Central. That pattern is increasingly rare. With the addition of sexism to the Church's modern Syllabus of Errors, the notion that men must teach boys and women girls is near heretical. More to the practical point, the combination of a baby bust and a dearth of people with religious vocations means that nuns, priests, and brothers have found themselves teaching together at consolidated and coeducational Catholic schools where, collectively, they are still outnumbered by lay teachers.

It's not, however, just a Catholic thing. Like other developments in the Church, it reflects trends in the larger society. One of those trends is coeducation. The National Association of Independent Schools has produced a progression of pie charts showing ever smaller slivers of single-sex schools among its up-market membership. In the 1963-64 school year, coed schools accounted for only 38 percent of its members; in 1990-91 the figure was 79 percent. Coeducation is even more the rule in the public sector, in which the rare single-sex school provides irresistible bait for feminists and the ACLU. Despite substantial community support, the Detroit school board failed to convince a federal judge this summer that it should be allowed to open three "male academies" for at-risk black youngsters. Afrocentric or Cathocentric, boys' schools run afoul of the orthodoxy that single-sex is sexist.

At least, that is, if that single sex is male. Although their numbers are not significantly larger than those of boys' schools, girls' schools and colleges are coming into vogue again, thanks to feminist approbation and new data showing that girls achieve better in a single-sex environment. One explanation is that teachers in coed classrooms unwittingly favor male students and stifle confidence and competitiveness in young women. The case for boys' schools lacks a comparable grounding in either political correctness or social science.

Male sexism also plays a part. Girls' schools often balk at going coed, knowing that boys will be reluctant to attend a formerly all-girls' school. On the other hand, a boys' school worried about a demographic downturn, according to J. Kristian Pueschel, director of the Boys Boarding School Coalition and assistant headmaster of the Trinity-Pawling School in Pawling, New York, "can easily find a solution to increase the size of the pie by going coeducational." And one reason boys'-school officials are so timid about trumpeting the virtues of an all-male education is that it helps keep the coeducation option "in their back pocket."

But what precisely *are* the virtues of all-boys' schools? In a conversation with this old boy, Brother Martin Zewe, Central's principal, offered no overarching theory comparable to those propounded by feminist supporters of girls' schools. He did emphasize the importance of Central's *tradition* as a boys' school—a tradition that even boys who first question the absence of girls come to cherish. A similar phenomenon was reported to me by John A. Pidgeon, now in his thirty-fifth year as headmaster of the Kiski School, a 103-year-old boarding school an hour away from Pittsburgh. In periodic secret ballots, Kiski boys oppose coeducation by majorities reminiscent of pre-glasnost Soviet elections.

An argument from tradition is, unfortunately, easy to dismiss. The problem is that boys' schools these days are a tradition in search of a theory. (An appeal to patriarchy is obviously not an option.) Not that boys'-school advocates don't have their arguments. Pidgeon, who views the stampede toward coeducation as a fad comparable to the New Math, cited what might be called the distraction factor. Separating adolescent boys from girls for a part of the year, Pidgeon said, discourages posturing: "Our kids are not walking around with wacky haircuts trying to look like Charlie Cool." Pidgeon also credited Kiski's all-male environment for the enduring friendships the students take away from the school. "These guys stick together like glue," he said.

Pueschel put the case for boys' schools less pithily, but with a more contemporary spin. Pueschel, who referred to studies showing that "developmentally, boys and girls are different, but they're different in wonderful ways," noted that when feminists began advocating a single-sex environment, nobody rose to the occasion to let society know that "males need this, too." But now, he pointed out, men's movement guru



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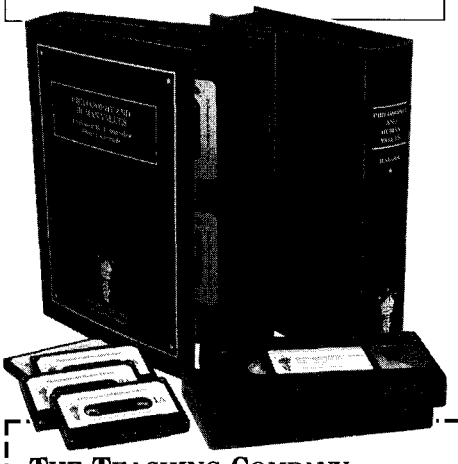

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Robert Bly and others have said: "Wait a minute. Is there a maleness that has been missed? Has the industrial society suppressed a maleness that we now need to get in touch with?"

Pueschel acknowledged that "I don't think Bly would be talking that way if it hadn't been for feminists." And Pueschel himself, in defending all-boys' schools, cited Harvard's Carol Gilligan, praised by some feminists for her work on differences in moral reasoning between men and women. Gilligan has suggested that for women the moral imperative is "an injunction to care," while for men it is "an injunction to respect the rights of others." Pueschel said that in the all-male environment of a boarding school, boys "more naturally develop this care focus because they have to take care of each other, they have to listen to each other's needs." The ability of boys at a boarding school to "bond as females do" explains "the end product which we've identified for centuries, the bonding, the friendships that last forever."

The association of boarding schools with caring might come as a surprise to at least a few products of such schools, not to mention readers of a prep-school novel like Richard Yates's *A Good School*, in which a sensitive boy is brought up short by his roommate when he suggests, men's-movement style, that they "talk a while." At the same time, I think Pidgeon and Pueschel are right to emphasize the intensity and longevity of friendships forged at boys' schools. Lately I have been meeting once a month with a reading (and drinking) discussion group consisting mostly of former Central boys. No drums are pounded at these conclaves, no dead poets are dissected, and no souls are bared (so far, anyway). But the fact that we meet at all, so long after our school days, and that we meet to talk, seems to bemuse outsiders, wives included. Would we be getting together if we had attended a coeducational school? Perhaps, but I doubt it.

Does that male bonding constitute an overwhelming argument for boys' schools? No, and neither does my pet argument for boys' schools, which is also open to the charge of co-opting a feminist analysis. This is the counterstereotype argument: if a girls' school allows females to assume leadership roles that boys might arrogate to themselves in a coed environment, my experience is that something similar happens in a boys school. Because every activity (including "feminine" pursuits such as art, theater, and even, in my day, cheerleading) will by definition be the preserve of boys, there is less of a stigma attached to such unstereotypical behavior.

Thankfully, the courts and Congress have not yet embraced the notion that single-sex schools always amount to invidious discrimination. The judge who ruled against Detroit's public male academies noted that, because the school board hadn't established comparable girls' schools, he was "not presented with the question of whether the board can provide separate but equal public-school institutions for boys and girls." The Supreme Court hedged in a similar way in 1982 when it ordered a state nursing school in Mississippi to admit men because the state hadn't proved an "exceedingly persuasive justification" for excluding them. (In June a federal judge managed to find such a justification for the ban on women cadets at the Virginia Military Institute.)

Historically single-sex public colleges receive special consideration in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibit sex discrimination in educational programs or activities receiving federal funds. Finally, there is the matter of tax-exempt status which blurs the neat distinction some feminists made between public single-sex schools (iniquitous) and private ones (innocuous). While the Internal Revenue Service has revoked the tax-exempt status of private schools that discriminate on the basis of race, there is no comparable policy regarding private schools that exclude one sex or the other.

This governmental reluctance to treat single-sex schools as the moral equivalent of racist schools—or of sex discrimination in the adult workplace—could have practical importance if advocates of school "choice" win enactment of legislation allowing parents to spend public dollars at private and parochial schools, including, presumably, single-sex schools. But it also bespeaks a recognition that reasonable, non-sexist people can differ about the merits of separate schools for boys and girls. The asserted pedagogical and psychic advantages of boys' schools may be chimerical. If so, Detroit's investment in male academies would have been money wasted (and the same might be said of the fees parents pay to private and Catholic boys' schools). But would it have been oppressive, injurious, unconstitutional? It is hard for me to come to that conclusion. But then I'm a Central boy.

MICHAEL MCGOUGH is editor of the editorial page of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.*

**Well, not really.**

# AREN'T WE SPECIAL?

*By Jonathan Bines*

You'll be relieved to know that the American education system is not ignoring the needs of its young gifted and talented Alaskan Eskimos. As coordinator of Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) for the Lower Kuskokwim School District in southern Alaska, Linda Manwill is in charge of identifying and providing special services to students—overwhelmingly Yup'ik Eskimo with the occasional



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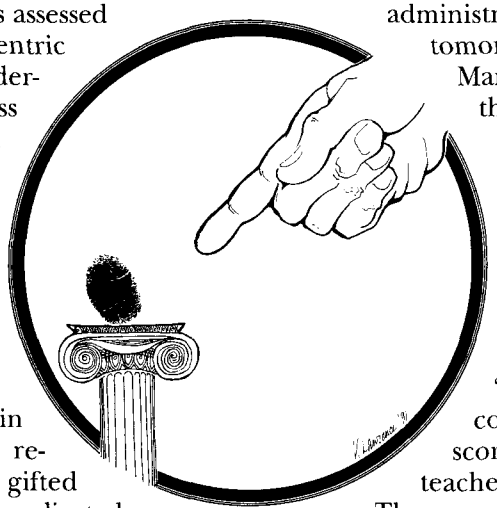
frontier Caucasian mixed in—in twenty-six schools scattered across 44,000 square miles of subarctic wilderness, most of it accessible only by air and, in summer, boat.

As you might imagine, winnowing out the gifted from among the ruck of Eskimo youth has proved a daunting task for Manwill, not only because of the inaccessibility of the schools, but because of certain cultural peculiarities of the target population, such as the fact that most Yup'ik are by trade subsistence-level hunters and fishermen. "This type of lifestyle," she explains in a brief report, "impacts directly on the education system in a cultural and a practical manner."

The Kuskokwim GATE program was already managing to identify a certain number of gifted kids, but Manwill was convinced that more were out there. To locate her elusive quarry, she scrapped the traditional means by which giftedness is assessed and devised a new, more Eskimo-centric process, relying on a larger understanding of the nature of giftedness to reflect particular Yup'ik cultural manifestations of giftedness and to include such qualities as "Task Commitment, Creativity, Leadership, and Artistic or Performing Arts." The new screening process has increased the number of students identified for inclusion by 50 percent.



Manwill's pioneering work in gifted-prospecting has been well received among GATE types. Since her gifted program began in 1988, it has been replicated in modified forms in school districts throughout Alaska and researchers and administrators around the country have written for information. In a report published in the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented newsletter, Manwill asserts that the new identification model "can be used for identification for [gifted] programming which will reflect cultural variance anywhere in the world." But I'm still trying to figure out how Manwill's screening process is any less arbitrary than the one it replaced. To put it another way, if 150 gifted Eskimos are better than 100, why aren't 300 gifted Eskimos better still? And if 300, why not the rest?

Special programs to accommodate bright kids have been around since the turn of the century, but the idea of "identifying" the gifted as a distinct group first gained scientific credibility in the 1920s with the work of Louis Terman, the father of IQ testing in America. Support for GATE has tended to fluctuate as Americans shift their attention from equality to excellence in public education: it surged after the Sputnik launch in 1957, for example, when producing brilliant scientists became Americans' main concern, and plunged in the equal rights environment of the late '60s. Ultimately, though, despite the hostility of many educators, special education for the gifted has managed to win enough support that it is mandated in more than half the states and offered in at least a few school districts in most others.

Gifted programs purport to meet the special needs of the brightest students—kids who, it's argued, wind up languishing in classes pitched far below their ability levels. The trouble is, once you get beyond the noble sentiment that bright kids should get support in school, you've pretty much exhausted the areas on which the GATE world agrees. After more than seventy years of research, there isn't even consensus on an "operational definition" of giftedness. The literature abounds with tautological definitions ("Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons") indicating that a gifted child tends either to excel in some way or at least to have the potential to do so. Beyond that, however, the administrators charged with identifying tomorrow's Einsteins, Shakespeares, and Marilyn Vos Savants are pretty much on their own.

Without clear guidelines, GATE administrators have been forced—indeed, encouraged—simply to make up a definition to complement the services they will be providing. In practice, in most GATE programs, the "gifted" imprimatur is bestowed on the basis of a kid's "general intelligence" (read: IQ) in conjunction with achievement test scores and recommendations from teachers, parents, and sometimes peers. The process usually begins around the second grade, which is still fairly early to be passing judgment on a kid's potential. If anything, though, the trend is toward even earlier screening—sometimes as early as nursery school. (Yes, there is an IQ test for 4-year-olds.)

Despite its uncontested ability to pick smart kids, this type of screening process has become increasingly controversial. Critics inside and outside the GATE world have long argued that to tie the definition of giftedness so narrowly to intellectual ability excludes a whole host of other ways that giftedness can manifest itself. Furthermore, socioeconomic underdogs, from Alaskan Natives to inner-city minorities, have a tough time making the "gifted" cut—in part the result, fair or unfair, of IQ testing. For whatever reason, blacks and Hispanics score consistently less well than whites. The resulting disparities have fueled charges that GATE often represents little more than privileged education for privileged students at public expense.

To counter such claims, many of the more politically correct GATE programs have de-emphasized IQ and achievement tests in favor of more inclusive "alternative identification procedures." Manwill, for instance, now provides a comprehensive series of questionnaires



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for teachers and parents to complete, assessing students on such difficult-to-measure characteristics as communications skill and musical aptitude. She includes a culture-specific checklist, which rates young Yup'ik on a scale of one to five on their respect of tribal elders, their storytelling ability, and so on. Other districts now have potentially gifted kids take standardized "creativity tests," or submit work samples, or rate themselves on a questionnaire. These new screening processes do include a more diverse group of kids, but only by reducing the identification process from its already dubious objective basis to pure psychological guesswork.

But whether your program includes 3 percent of the student body or 20, if it denies a kid the chance to participate it's still exclusive. And excluding children on the basis of their perceived ability, even when done with the best of intentions, can wind up doing a lot of harm. Kids (as well as adults) have a well-known tendency to work up or down to expectations, even when they are not made explicit—a phenomenon psychologist Robert Rosenthal calls the Pygmalion effect. (In a 1960 experiment, Rosenthal provided teachers in a California public school with falsified aptitude test records for some of their students; at the end of the year he found that the kids had performed up to their falsely predicted levels.) By siphoning off the brightest kids, or merely by telling a teacher who they are, GATE can wind up contributing to lowered expectations for the non-gifted, which can translate directly into lower performance.

GATE backers counter that the gifted need higher expectations to complement their higher abilities. This point was made for me most eloquently by the kids at a Center for the Highly Gifted that I visited in Fairfax County, Virginia. I watched as fourth-graders puzzled out SAT-type word-analogies (BEE is to APIARY as BIRD is to _____), and fifth-graders used a discussion of maps to launch into articulate accounts of their own varied travel histories, with the teacher at the front interposing questions only to keep the effusive class focused and thinking critically. Later, in informal discussion, the children radiated self-confidence; they talked about how bored they were at their old schools, where they never had homework, and how challenging the center seemed by comparison. One girl told me of her frustration in a non-GATE fourth-grade class where some of the kids "couldn't even read the word 'water.' " (I'll vouch for this child's giftedness: when, during her IQ test, she was asked the similarity between a pound and a yard, she replied, "You can keep a dog in both.") Should bright kids like her be returned to the educational morass to appease some do-gooder's idea of equal educational opportunity?

This question, a common refrain among gifted educators, underscores one of the less inspiring reasons for the popularity of gifted programs, especially in and around the cities: they come to represent the last line of defense against the flight of the middle class to the private schools. Although some administrators deny it, critics of GATE contend that parents increasingly demand differentiated education as the price for their continued participation in the public education system. For whatever reason, the number of GATE programs has increased dramatically in the past five to ten years (although some of this increase has been mitigated—at least temporarily—by recession-induced cuts).

The most disheartening aspect of the GATE philosophy is the contention of some administrators that, by identifying the gifted, educators are not only rescuing the brightest kids from an unresponsive system, but somehow saving all the others from the stress and frustration of an overly challenging education. The truth is that much of what passes for good gifted education—the individual attention, the emphasis on critical thinking, the encouragement of creative potential, the high expectations, the exciting enrichment experiences—is really just good education, period (as many GATE administrators, including Manwill, are perfectly willing to admit). Through their very success, gifted and talented programs have inadvertently exposed one of the most insidious problems of public education: the fact that we expect too little from all our kids. •

**The case against Jonathan Kozol.**

# SAVAGE EQUALITIES

*By Peter Schrag*

It's almost twenty-five years since the publication of Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age,* which recounted his eight months as a teacher in a rundown Boston ghetto school. Kozol was fired by the then notorious Boston School Committee for reading Langston Hughes's poem "Ballad of a Landlord" to his fourth-grade class—not part of the syllabus, the school committee said—and instantly became a major voice in the movement for school equity and integration of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Kozol has never strayed far from that theme and has now returned to it with a book called *Savage Inequalities* that's gotten a respectful, even glowing, reception. Just before it came out, *Publishers Weekly* carried an unprecedented open letter on its cover, where it has never run anything but advertising, to tell George Bush to read this "startling and disturbing" new book.



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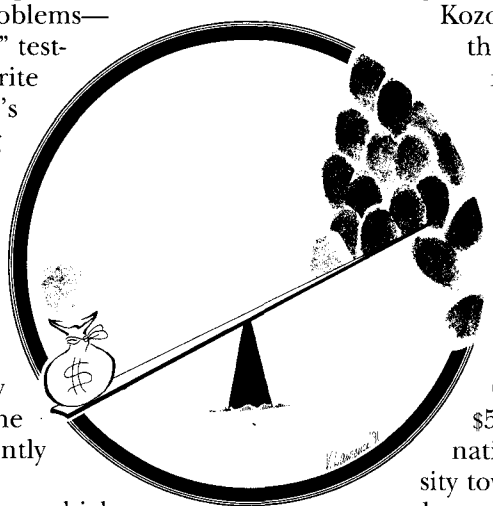
*ities* has made Kozol once again the most visible left-wing critic of American education and the star witness in a movement, now spreading to more than a dozen states—among them Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee—to get court orders to equalize per-pupil spending between public schools in rich and poor communities.

It's a moving book—about filthy schools where roofs leak and halls are flooded each time it rains, where three or four classes have to share a gym or cafeteria because there aren't enough rooms, where teachers have outdated textbooks or none at all. It's also a reminder that a lot of those kids really want to learn, aren't on drugs, and understand that this is a society that treats white suburban children a lot better than it treats black inner-city kids. Given the thin gruel that the Bush administration has served up to deal with the nation's horrendous school problems—roughly equal parts school "choice," testing, and that old conservative favorite "more money's not the answer"—it's not surprising that Kozol is getting attention.



The rationale of the equalizers is simple: unequal spending among schools denies children equal protection of the laws. A poor community with a weak tax base simply can't spend as much on each child's education as a wealthy one, even if it raises rates to the breaking point, and that's patently unfair.

But is equalization of all spending—which, in addition to increasing the spending in poor districts, means capping the spending of affluent or motivated districts—really the solution? Consider California, the only major state where equalization has been thoroughly tried. (Texas and New Jersey are now starting down the same path but haven't gotten beyond the political acrimony and administrative chaos to be fair tests.) The results have been a wondrous illustration of the law of unintended consequences.

The most obvious of those consequences is that equalization sharply reduced local incentives to raise school taxes. After the California Supreme Court ruled, in *Serrano* v. *Priest* (1976), that the old funding system was unconstitutional, the legislature agreed to bring per-pupil spending in virtually all of the state's districts to within $100 (later revised to $200) of the state average. It proposed to do that not by requiring the rich districts to spend less, something that would have been academically unseemly and politically impossible, but by directing additional state money to the poor districts. Yet since the funding formula also reduced state funding one dollar for each dollar that districts might have raised in additional local property taxes, it eliminated much of the rationale and motivation for local efforts to improve the schools. (The exceptions to the formula were a few oil-rich districts that get no state aid.)

School equalization might have taken decades to achieve had it not been for the fortuitous passage of Proposition 13 in 1978. By slashing and capping local property tax revenues, Prop 13 shifted the burden of school funding to state income and sales taxes, which made equalization a lot easier to realize. But because of 13, and perhaps because of *Serrano* as well, the state's spending on schools has also slipped precipitately—from sixth or seventh in the nation to twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth. California now spends less per child than any other major industrial state, and less than the national average. As one state education official said recently, it is much harder to motivate people to pay more taxes for education when they can't see the results right down the street.

Kozol has a lot of numbers dramatizing the inequities in spending between, for example, Camden and Princeton, New Jersey; Chicago and suburban New Trier High School; and New York City and suburban Manhasset (Long Island). But he doesn't point out that the $7,299 New York City spent on each child in 1989-90 was nearly double what most of the fanciest California suburbs got to spend that same year. California now spends roughly $5,100 a year per student. The national average is $5,500. The university town of Davis, where I live, and which sends as many of its graduates to college as New Trier, would kill to get $6,000 per student, let alone $7,000.

With the power to appropriate funds having shifted from local boards to the state government, it is no longer possible to know who is responsible for the financial problems of the local schools—the board that allocates the funds and overspends or mismanages them or the governor and legislature that fail to pony up enough to begin with. The same goes for responsibility for the construction of new schools, now so incomprehensibly divided between state and local agencies that almost no one understands the system.

Moreover, since school boards no longer have anything to do with setting tax rates, the interest of local business groups and taxpayer organizations in the schools—or in running people for the board—has sharply declined, leaving more and more districts in the control of the only well-financed group that's really interested in school affairs: the teachers' union. The Los Angeles school board, which runs the largest system in the state, is now controlled by people who got the lion's share of their election campaign support from UTLA, the United Teachers of Los Angeles. As fiscal control moves to the state, the moderate citi-



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zens' groups that once were the backbone of local government and local schools are less and less involved.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that the union-dominated Los Angeles board awarded huge raises to its teachers three years ago—the average increase was roughly 27 percent over three years—and is now in deep financial trouble. And though it stands out in its generosity to employees, it's hardly alone. Two other large districts, Oakland and Richmond, are in such financial trouble from general mismanagement that they were taken over by state-appointed trustees; two dozen others teeter on the verge of bankruptcy. One-third of all the state's districts, according to state Controller Gray Davis, are spending more money than they take in.

Many of those problems are attributable to the state's generally dismal fiscal situation, but not all of them. District after district has been overly generous in setting pay scales, counting on state appropriations it didn't get. Most of the extra money that was supposed to go toward improving the inner-city schools also went directly into increasing teacher and administrative salaries even while programs have been cut to the bone. No state in the country has as large a gap between what it pays its school employees and what it spends on everything else. California is fifth in the nation in teachers' salaries and dead last—meaning worst— in class size: many classes are now running well over thirty children, even in elementary schools. We also have leaky roofs and rotting buildings, but we have them in the suburbs as well as in the inner cities.

Kozol says, correctly, that poor children are trapped in awful inner-city schools, while the middle class has choices. But he refuses to give poor children the chance to escape to better public schools, through choice. He's also too simplistic in blaming the comparatively poor performance of our schools on money alone. No country has ever done, or even tried, what this country is now trying: to take such a diverse population of children—20 percent of them from below the poverty level, many of them speaking little English, many from one-parent or no-parent families (all problems George Bush's education "program" ignores)—and educate each child at least through the twelfth grade for a high-tech culture. Under the circumstances, our schools are doing better than one might expect—as well at least as we did two decades ago. And given also what we've learned about the schools' external problems—poverty, broken families, teenage pregnancies, drugs, lack of health care, lack of child care—the first place to spend (and equalize) new money on children may not be in the K-12 school program, but on broader social problems.

Although Kozol acknowledges that equalization has been problematic in California, his support for the idea remains undiminished. Of course, Proposition 13 and fiscal mismanagement exacerbated the problems here. But the fact remains that equalization—any way you formulate it—tends to destroy local accountability and erode the supports and sense of mission that make strong schools possible.

PETER SCHRAG is editorial page editor at *The Sacramento Bee.*

**Could you pass the Japanese SAT?**

# FLUNKED

*By Albert Shanker*

We've had eight years of reports and studies telling us that U.S. education is in terrible shape. Now we have a bunch of revisionists saying that our kids are doing as well as they ever did (though they beg the question of whether that was good enough). They claim that the international comparisons putting U.S. students at the bottom of the pack are inaccurate and unfair. And some say that most kids are doing well; it's only disadvantaged children that we have to worry about.

It's true there is some good news about American education. Scores on commercial tests and on the National Assessment of Educational Progress are about where they were twenty or thirty years ago, and math and science scores are even up a bit. SAT scores, especially on the verbal section, have declined over the past twenty years, but that's partly because more students from the bottom half of their classes—the kinds of kids who never attempted the SAT before—are now taking it. We've made dramatic progress in narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students. Our high schools are graduating a higher percentage and a more diverse group of students than ever before. And American students enter college in unparalleled numbers—more than 50 percent of high school graduates go on to postsecondary school.

But can we be satisfied with performing as well as we did twenty or thirty years ago—or even a bit better? Would you be impressed if a car dealer tried to sell you a new American car by telling you it was just as good as the ones being made twenty or thirty years ago—when what you really wanted was a new Toyota? The point is, how well you're doing depends on your standards and on how well your competition is doing.

So what are our standards relative to our competition? One way to answer this question is to compare the tests that students from other nations have to take to get into college with the tests our students take. What do students taking the French *baccalauréat* or the German



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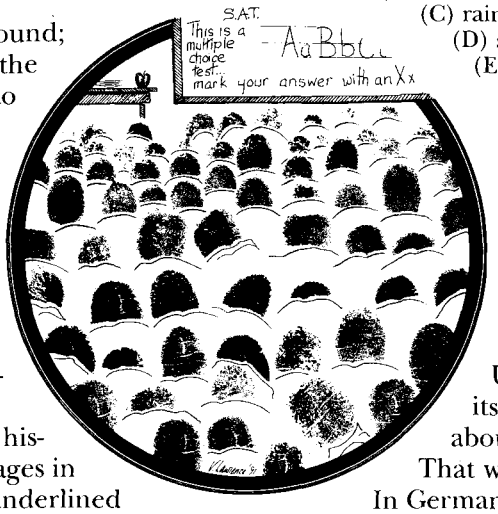
*Abitur* have to know? How does that compare with what the SAT or the ACT asks of American students? "National Tests: What Other Countries Expect Their Students to Know," put out by the National Endowment for the Humanities, presents samples of school-leaving and college-entrance tests from other countries and allows us to compare the standards and expectations they have for their best students with ours.

The big difference is that our standard college-entrance exams do not call on students to demonstrate what they have learned in school. In fact, the exams pride themselves on being divorced from the curriculum. Taking rigorous math and English courses helps in doing well because SAT and ACT questions concentrate on math and verbal skills, but the pretense, at least, is that the exams test "aptitude" rather than achievement. They are not asking students, "Have you mastered what you were taught in school?" but, "Are you smart enough to cut it at Harvard?"




Other nations' exams turn this around; they are based on the curriculum the students have studied, and they try to find out how much students have learned and how well they can use it. Of course, aptitude is not irrelevant if you're asked to write a four-hour essay on "By the fact that we live in the present, are we better able to understand it?"—as French students were on the philosophy section of a recent *bac*—but achievement is what counts.

Consider Japan's one-hour world history exam. Students read short passages in which there are a number of underlined phrases; then they are questioned about the phrases. The test, like ours, is multiple choice, but the passages offer no clues. Getting the right answers requires precise and detailed knowledge about, for example, criticisms of trade liberalization between England and France in the late eighteenth century. There's no chance of getting by with a combination of vague general knowledge and inspired guesswork.

French students show their grasp of subject matter by writing lengthy essays in subjects such as history and geography, French and philosophy. One of the questions in a four-hour history/geography exam asks students to spend two hours discussing "The Evolution of Domestic Policy in the Soviet Union from 1953 to Today." Or students could choose to write about the development of the American presidency since 1945, or European resistance to the Nazis between 1939 and 1945.

German students take written and oral exams in four subjects that must cover three broad categories—languages, literature, and the arts; social sciences; and math, natural sciences, and technology. A sample question from the three-and-a-half-hour general history exam dealing with "The Weimar Republic and National Socialism" asks students to do such things as "describe the political conflicts that took place at the national level between the proclamation of the republic and the opening of the constitutional assembly" and to "determine political convictions" from an excerpt of a speech that is included.

And what are American students asked to do? Here's one typical question from an SAT exam:

> Choose the word or phrase that is most nearly opposite in meaning to the word in capital letters ...
> SOPHOMORIC: (A) charitable (B) profound (C) accidental (D) histrionic (E) straightforward

Here's another:

> Choose the word or set of words that, when inserted in the sequence, *best* fits the meaning of the sentence as a whole ...
> The summer's _____ drought has brought about a _____ shedding of leaves
> (A) torrid ... nonexistent
> (B) inconsequential ... disastrous
> (C) rainy ... colorful
> (D) severe ... premature
> (E) unusual ... traditional

Americans often dismiss contrasts like these by talking about elitism. They say that only a tiny percentage of Japanese, French, and German students take the rigorous exams required for college or meet the high standards set for them. And they say that, whereas the United States is committed to all of its students, other countries care only about educating the top few percent. That was true in the past, but it isn't now. In Germany 30 percent of the *total* cohort pass the *Abitur*. In France 67 percent of all 15- to 16-year-olds were enrolled in college-track secondary schools in 1990; 50 percent of them took the *bac* and 38.5 percent passed. In 1982, the last date for which I have figures, 36 percent of Japanese students passed the college-entrance exam; the number now is probably higher. And all of these countries do a better job of educating their non-college-bound students than we do.

If anything, it is our system that is elitist. Because our tests are divorced from curriculum, they favor kids who come from well-educated families or from families that can afford to enroll their children in commercial test-skills courses. Rather than helping to level the playing field, our tests make the contest harder for disadvantaged youngsters.

They also send a particular message. In saying, "We're not going to test you on what you have learned; we'll test you on your aptitude," we've told our children that knowledge doesn't count; that working hard so you can learn something doesn't count; that school doesn't count. We cannot solve this problem merely by changing our exams or even raising our standards and improving our curriculum—though all of this is necessary. Why do students studying for the *bac* or the *Abitur* work hard in school? And why, when they get home from school,



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do they work some more? It's not because they don't have television in France and Germany. It's because the kids know it's the only way they'll get something they very much want: admission to college.

We need to reconnect effort and achievement with going to college, and that means re-establishing *real* college (not high school or junior high school) admission standards. This will mean fewer kids going to four-year colleges. It will also mean that colleges will be places where students get a college education. What about the kids who aren't admitted to college? The other countries I've mentioned provide high-quality further education for students who don't go to university, and so must we. Making changes like this will be very tough. But if we are serious about having a world-class education system, instead of just patting ourselves on the back and telling ourselves that our education system is as good as ever, we have no choice.

ALBERT SHANKER is president of the American Federation of Teachers.

**The limits of racial role models.**

# BEYOND THE PALE

*By Abigail Thernstrom*

In the mid-1960s the distinguished sociologist James S. Coleman made a startling discovery—but one whose implications he chose to ignore. He was working on his now-classic *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, in which he argued that family background, not the money that schools spent, made for high student achievement. There was one exception to that rule, however. One school resource turned out to matter: the scores that teachers received on a vocabulary test. Word-smart teachers made for verbally proficient kids. The finding raised a troubling and unwelcome question. In 1966, when the volume appeared, the courts were busily integrating both staff and students in Southern schools. But most black teachers had been poorly educated. White teachers—the products of better schools—generally had superior verbal skills. Would black students thus do better with white teachers? It was a question that Coleman dared not ask.

Twenty-five years later, the once-unspoken is often said: the color of a teacher matters. But the point now generally takes a politically acceptable form. Black children need *black* teachers—not white ones, it's argued. In fact, at best it's only a partial truth. Black students need good teachers, and good teachers generally do well on standardized tests. Sadly, as in 1966, a disproportionate number of those who get high scores on standardized tests are white. That shouldn't be a permanent state of affairs, but it's the case today.

The current interest in black teachers for black students is certainly understandable. The educational plight of inner-city students is seen as desperate. In fact, however, the academic performance of black students is less dismal than generally understood; the racial gap is steadily narrowing. Scores on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress tests show dramatic progress. For instance, in 1980 black high school juniors were six years behind whites in their reading scores; by 1990 the gap had closed to 3.5 years.

But even if black educational standards were in genuine crisis, the role model solution would not be the answer. Districts heavily staffed by black teachers and administrators don't necessarily produce successful students. District 5 in New York City, for instance, has a staff that is 70 percent minority, yet it finished last among thirty-two districts on citywide reading scores announced last June. In Atlanta, white teachers have almost disappeared from the school system, yet test scores, college-enrollment, and dropout rates are consistently among the worst in Georgia. The enormous literature on the educational performance of black students contains no solid evidence to support the view that the race of the teacher has any effect.

Nevertheless, many school systems are on a determined search for more black teachers. New York City adopted an affirmative action plan last spring that includes a directive to find teachers in Southern black colleges. In doing so, they'll have plenty of company. Around the country, recruiters are competing in a seller's market. "When you go to teacher fairs," one Minnesota official has complained, "you'll see some of the best-qualified teachers of color walking around with five and six contracts in their pocket, just ready to choose." Those contracts may include college loan forgiveness and other such enticements.

Such well-intentioned effort misses the point that Coleman wanted to make: it's academic skill that counts. Teachers without it won't teach well. If Detroit wants excellent teachers, it should set its sights on those with high grades on teachers' exams—whatever their race or ethnicity. Evidence on this point is mounting. Thus Harvard Professor Ronald F. Ferguson, in a study of Texas teachers' scores on a language skills exam, found that those who did well got better classroom results. On the average, students in predominantly white districts did much better on reading tests than those in predominantly black districts. The reason? Not poverty, parent education, or class size. The white districts were, of course, generally better off, the parents of pupils were more highly educated, and so on. But when these differences were held constant statistically, the difference that made a difference was the quality of the teaching staff, as measured by the language skills exam.



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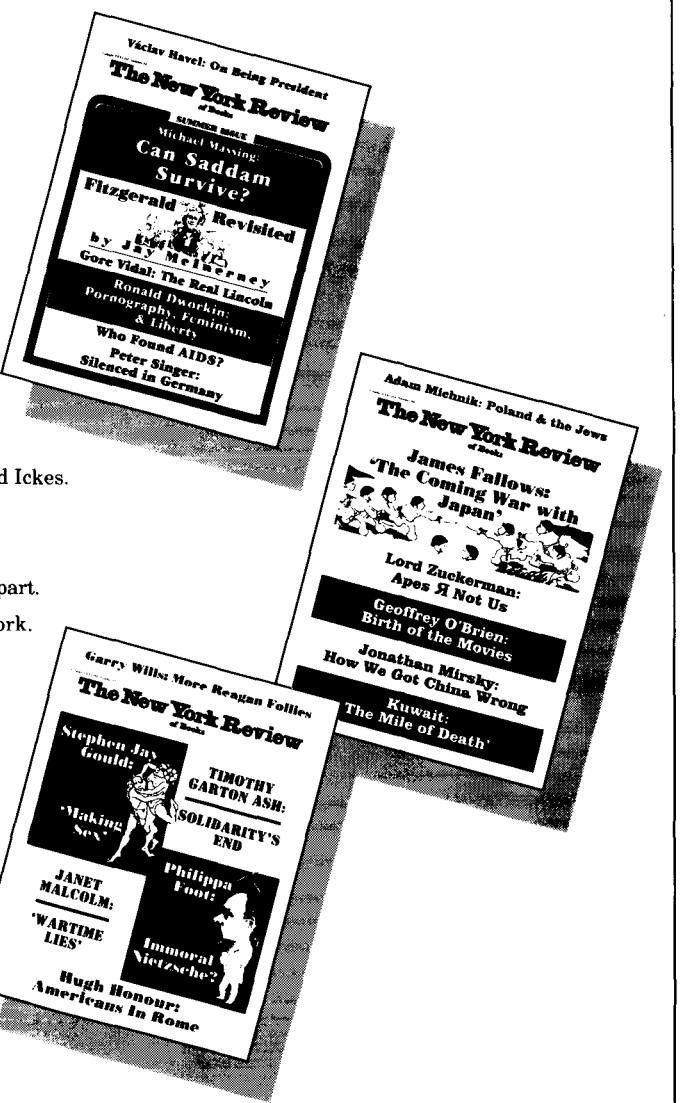
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Are school systems likely to get academically skilled teachers with an aggressive affirmative action policy? At the moment, they are not. Very recent data are unavailable, but the past rates on teacher competency tests in 1982-83 told a quite dismal story. In Alabama, for instance, 86 percent of whites and only 43 percent of blacks scored above the cutoff point. In Arizona the figures were 73 and 24 percent; in California, 76 and 26 percent. The worst was Louisiana: 78 versus 15 percent.

Those results are actually not too surprising. A large racial gap shows up in SAT and ACT scores as well. And those are scores for all college-bound students, a group that includes many high-performing youngsters who will not choose to teach. In fact, the relatively poor performance of black students on teachers' exams is due in part to declining interest in the profession. In 1977 black college graduates were 1.4 times as likely as white students to earn a degree in education; by 1989 that situation had been reversed. Critics of national exams attribute that decline to the reliance on competency tests to determine who shall teach; such tests are discriminatory, it's charged. But even if true, that would surely be only a partial explanation. Equally important has to be the pull of law, medicine, and business—the prestigious professions.

The notion that kids need adults with whom they can identify is obviously not totally wrong; black children have to know that they too can succeed. And black teachers may often bring a special sensitivity to a predominantly black classroom. But matching colors—students' and teachers'—can only do so much. Despite all the moaning, it's not that hard to educate kids—advantaged and disadvantaged, black and white. A lot of schools are doing it. More can make it happen. But teachers expected to educate kids must themselves be well educated. National exams test needed skills. Skilled teachers, skilled kids.

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM is the author of *Whose Votes Count? Affirmative Action and Minority Voting Rights* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

**My year at New York's P.S. 98.**

# SCENES FROM THE CLASS STRUGGLE

*By Sara Mosle*

**I.**

New York City had a teacher shortage last fall, but finding it wasn't easy. On the Wednesday after Labor Day, a few days before classes were to begin, I still didn't have a job. A "charter" member of a new program called Teach for America, I sat, with diminishing hopes, in the placement office of School District Six at 181st Street and Broadway in Upper Manhattan. Along the cramped corridors, children whimpered softly or screamed at the top of their lungs. Women chattered nervously among themselves in several languages. The atmosphere was like the emergency room of a hospital. People sounded as though they were in pain.

Teach for America, founded in 1989 by Princeton grad Wendy Kopp, and modeled on the Peace Corps, recruits recent college graduates to teach for two years in areas with chronic teacher shortages. TFA doesn't circumvent the normal process for becoming a public school teacher; it simply makes it a little more rational. It arranged for me to take the National Teacher's Exam, had me fingerprinted, and provided two months of summer training. Once I set foot in the placement office, however, I was on my own.

Here was the apparent system for evaluating applications in New York City: whoever sat directly in front of the personnel director got a position. For nearly two days I had been the next in line. Behind me in single file were more than a dozen other people, also waiting. The personnel director seemed unconcerned about our relative qualifications. There was no list of applicants, no list of vacancies. Principals were supposed to call and let the office know of openings, but many don't. They simply try to fill positions themselves. No one had moved for hours. Only the clock had moved, the big hand lapping the little hand: 10:30, 12:00, 1:45, 3:00. Word crept back to us that thirty or so more people were waiting in the library. No one was going to risk losing her place in line to tell them, but they didn't have a prayer.

Phones were ringing incessantly. Eventually the sec-

SARA MOSLE, a former assistant literary editor of TNR, writes a weekly column for *Newsday*'s Sunday book section.



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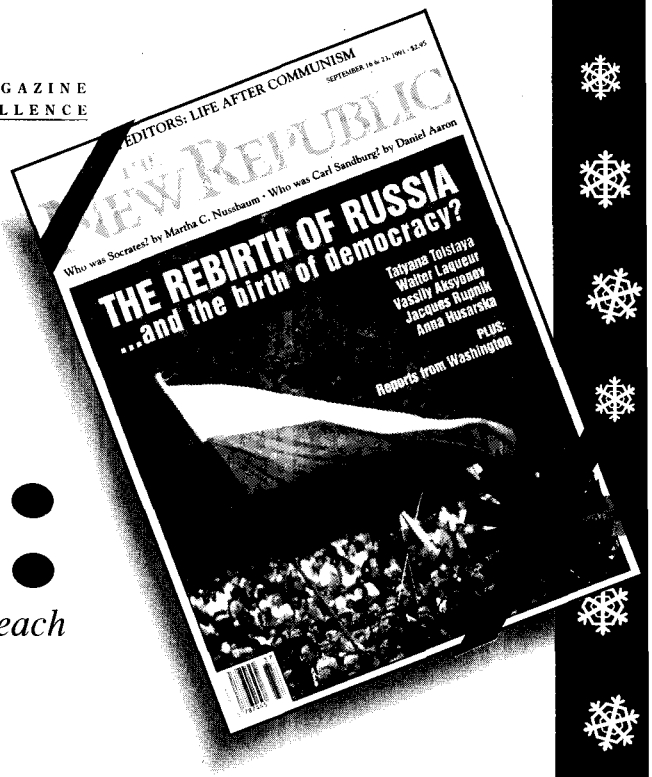


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retaries just took the receivers off the hook. (I thought, "But how will the principals call?") On the wall hung a poster with the cartoon character "Cathy": "Let's take control of situations before they take control of us." Every once in a while, someone would burst in: "You can't believe the school I've just been to! Excrement on the front steps!" Or, "Can't you offer me something else? My commute will take two hours!" The woman was almost in tears. And I was envious of these people. At least they had jobs.

Suddenly the personnel director saw me, as if for the first time. "We should find you a school." "Yes," I said. She pulled me close: "Can you handle really tough kids?" I nodded, numbly. She looked skeptical. "Go to P.S. 98, at 212th and Broadway."

## II.

Friends used to ask, "Is it—*dangerous*?" Convincing them otherwise wasn't easy. When I first walked through the doors at P.S. 98, an elementary school in a largely Dominican neighborhood at the northern tip of Manhattan, I thought, "Please, please, please hire me here." The walls were brightly painted and adorned with student artwork. "That's Harlem!" one friend exclaimed. "No," I said, "that's Inwood, above Washington Heights." The obliviousness went both ways. For the kids in my fourth-grade class, Harlem was *down*town. When several students came to my apartment one weekend, we walked out of the subway at Columbus Circle, easily the most unimpressive spot on the Upper West Side, and their jaws simply dropped: "Wo-o-W!" They couldn't believe all the tall buildings. "Aren't there any Spanish-speaking people here?" one kid asked. "No," another answered: "Only Americans."

Inner-city is a bit of a misnomer. Outer-city would be more like it. What immediately strikes you upon exiting the subway station at 207th Street is the space. Most of the buildings in the neighborhood are less than seven stories tall. The Cloisters look down on the bustling markets on Dyckman Street. A few blocks north the Hudson spills into the East River. At the end of the broad cross streets, you can catch glimpses of the Bronx up on a hill. People you've never seen before call from the corner: "Hey, Teacher!" The bodega owner gives you a special deal on the popsicles you buy for your students. The pizza man throws in an extra pie for the class party. Everyone knows you. After all, you're teaching their kids.

In a recent article *The New York Times* cited as an example of the plight of Soviet schools in the crumbling economy a Moscow junior high—School 716—that "works a double shift to accommodate its 1,000 students." We're in no position to criticize. The same was true of my school in New York. With nearly 1,600 students in grades K through fourth, P.S. 98 is one of the most overcrowded elementary schools in one of the most overcrowded districts in the New York public school system. To accommodate all of its students, the school had two full "sessions" of third and fourth grade every day. Kids on the "a.m. session" began classes at 7:00 a.m. and went straight until noon—no breaks, no recess, for most classes not even gym. At 12:00 the kids went to lunch and were then dismissed for the day. Working parents couldn't pick up their children. Eight-, 9-, 10-year-olds would simply wander the streets. P.S. 98 had no place to house them before or after class. Teachers were instructed to escort their students off school grounds.

My kids were on the "p.m. session." They arrived for lunch at 11:30, although many skipped it. At noon I led them up five flights of stairs into the room the a.m. teacher had just vacated. Their school day went straight from 12:15 until 5:30. The a.m. and p.m. teachers passed each other on the staircase. It was like the changing of the guard. Technically, kids were in school for the same number of hours as those on "regular" session, but those hours were far less productive. I don't have a five-and-a-half-hour attention span, so how could a 10-year-old?

Split session was also a nightmare for the teacher. I could never get into my classroom alone. (The a.m. teacher was there in the mornings. The custodians shut the building behind me as I left at 5:30.) I took to hauling my supplies—teacher manuals, papers, markers—to and from school in a suitcase so that I could plan and prepare lessons at home.

The only difference between School 716 in Moscow and P.S. 98 in New York is that in Russia, classes are smaller. At School 716 the limit is thirty students per class. At P.S. 98 classes were right at the legal ceiling, thirty-two. Every additional kid after twenty or so is like a point on the Richter scale. It's ten times worse.

The mystery is why classes in New York City are so big. With nearly 1 million schoolchildren and 65,000 teachers, the ratio ought to be closer to 15-to-1, that in many private schools. But many of those 65,000 teachers—often those with the most experience and earning the highest salaries—hold "out-of-classroom" positions. These are the plum assignments: "resource" teachers who offer individual instruction in reading or math, physical education instructors, or "clusters," who roam from room to room, providing classroom teachers with a daily "preparation period," or "prep," by taking over their classes for forty-five minutes.

"Preps" were great for teachers, but they were mostly a waste of time for the kids. Lessons were often poorly planned—irrelevant, or redundant. What's more, for p.m. teachers, they wasted the first, most precious hours of the day. That's because "resource" and "cluster" teachers were on "regular session." Their day ended at 3 o'clock. Just as your day was beginning, another teacher would come to give you a prep, or to take a handful of kids to "resource room." While those students were gone, you couldn't teach any new material to the remaining three-fourths of your class. So you'd review. You'd do this three times a week. Add to that the endless stream of required "practice tests" dur-



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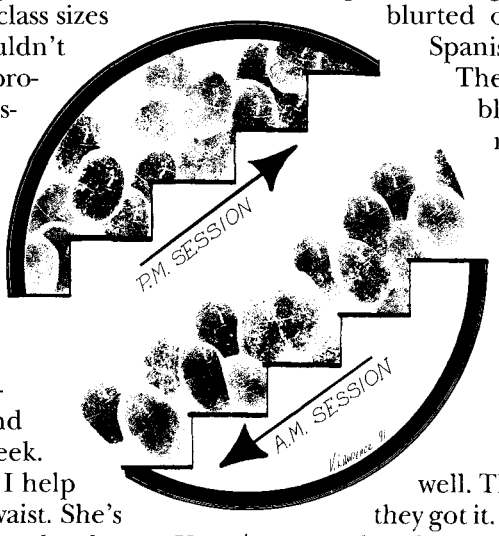
ing the months-long testing season in the spring and it was a wonder if you taught much of anything before 4 o'clock—except during "Golden Hour," the schoolwide reading period and one oasis of learning at the beginning of each day. Here was a typical afternoon schedule in April:

12:00 to 12:15 Hustle kids upstairs.
12:15 to 1:25: "Golden Hour."
1:25 to 2:10: Math teacher takes out handful of students for "resource room"; review with rest of class.
2:10 to 2:50: Prep teacher takes over class.
2:50 to 3:30: Practice reading test. Tests were to be administered by 3:00. Already, I'd be running late.

By this point, the kids were getting restless. They'd been in school for more than three hours. You had yet to introduce a single new lesson in math, science, or social studies. You'd cram these into the remaining two hours of the day. Of course, if every teacher actually taught a class of his or her own, class sizes would be smaller. The school wouldn't need resource people or clusters to provide individual attention. The classroom teacher could do that herself.




As it was, it was nearly impossible to offer individual attention. At no point was this more evident than during the first few moments of class. As you'd walk in, you'd give your kids until you counted to five to get their bookbags unpacked, their workbooks out, and their pencils ready: *One.* Natoya is scowling and in tears, for the third time this week. Sixto is trapped in his parka. Could I help him unzip it? *Two.* Yadira is at your waist. She's tiny, like a little angel. She's been to the doctor. You want to listen, but you also want her to sit down. ("I like the way Johary is ready. I like the way Julia is ready.") *Three.* Jose U.—Jose U. because you have three Joses in your class—is handing you his math homework. No, you don't want this now. ("Maggie is ready. Arleni is ready.") What happened to all your colored chalk? *Four.* You're wrestling a billowing bedspread of chart paper to the ground. The math coordinator pokes her head in. No, you haven't given the math test yet. ("Michael, let's get going. Jose C., Jose W.—*all* the Joses—sit down!") Suddenly there's a commotion in the corner. You march up, hands on hips: "What's going on here?" Oh my God. Yamile has just swallowed a button.

Moments like these used to terrify me. You'd imagine your face like a mug shot on the cover of one of the tabloids: TOT DIES. WHERE WAS TEACHER? The school didn't have an infirmary, or even a nurse. I'd scrawl a note to Richard Spero, the assistant principal and my immediate supervisor. He was the only person in the school who'd detect the note of panic and take it seriously. That's why he was such a good assistant principal. But some days Richard wasn't on duty. (Principals took turns covering the afternoon shift.) So you'd send a note to the office asking who was on duty and the office wouldn't know. Or the supervisor would never show up. Or she'd show up an hour later. One day one of my students discovered a bug in his half-eaten snack and threw up. I sent for a mop and pail. They never arrived. What was so unnerving was not any particular crisis, but the sense of being all alone. In the afternoons the only people in the building were the classes on the p.m. session, up on the fourth and fifth floors. You'd poke your head into the hallway and it would be deserted. I used to imagine my screams cascading down the cavernous stairwells and never hitting bottom.

I suppose this sounds like discipline was a problem. It wasn't. If my students became rowdy, I had usually given them good reason to be. During one math lesson on word problems, I kept asking: "How many jelly beans, then, would Arleni have in toto?" Or, "How many suckers, then, did Wendy buy in toto?" The kids kept snickering. What was so funny? Finally Jeffrey blurted out: "But Miss Mosle ... 'toto' in Spanish means a woman's—*you know!*" The kids were in hysterics. Could you blame them? In the middle of their math lesson, their monolingual teacher had said to them over and over again in perfect Dominican slang: "pussy ... pussy ... pussy."

### III.

Born in 1981 or so, the real heirs of the Reagan revolution, my students used to yell if a lesson was going well. They'd actually shout, "I got it!" when they got it. I won't wax nostalgic about such moments, but they are everything that people say they are. My students *wanted* to learn long division, how to make an electrical circuit, particularly tough vocabulary words, anything that they considered "hard." Once early in the year, I gave a short lesson on the term "non sequitur" after several had been uttered in the middle of a lesson. Afterward, my kids became non-sequitur police. Not one escaped their attention. They used the words for the rest of the year. Nearly all of the kids in my class were well behaved, funny, smart. Why does this come as a surprise?

In an article about children of violence in the June 1990 *Atlantic*, Karl Zinmeister remarks about the students at one inner-city school in D.C.: "Given that they were in the gifted class, one can assume that they were from more privileged backgrounds than most of their classmates." You can? Students from more privileged backgrounds may, on average, *perform* better, but that tells you nothing about any particular kid. And there is no correlation between "privilege" and "gifts"—that is, intelligence. Intelligence is stubborn. It survives in the inner city as it does in Beirut. But I think the assumption is a fairly common one. The biggest problem at P.S. 98 had nothing to do with violence or drugs. It had to do with expectations. Because the kids at P.S. 98

*continued on page 30*



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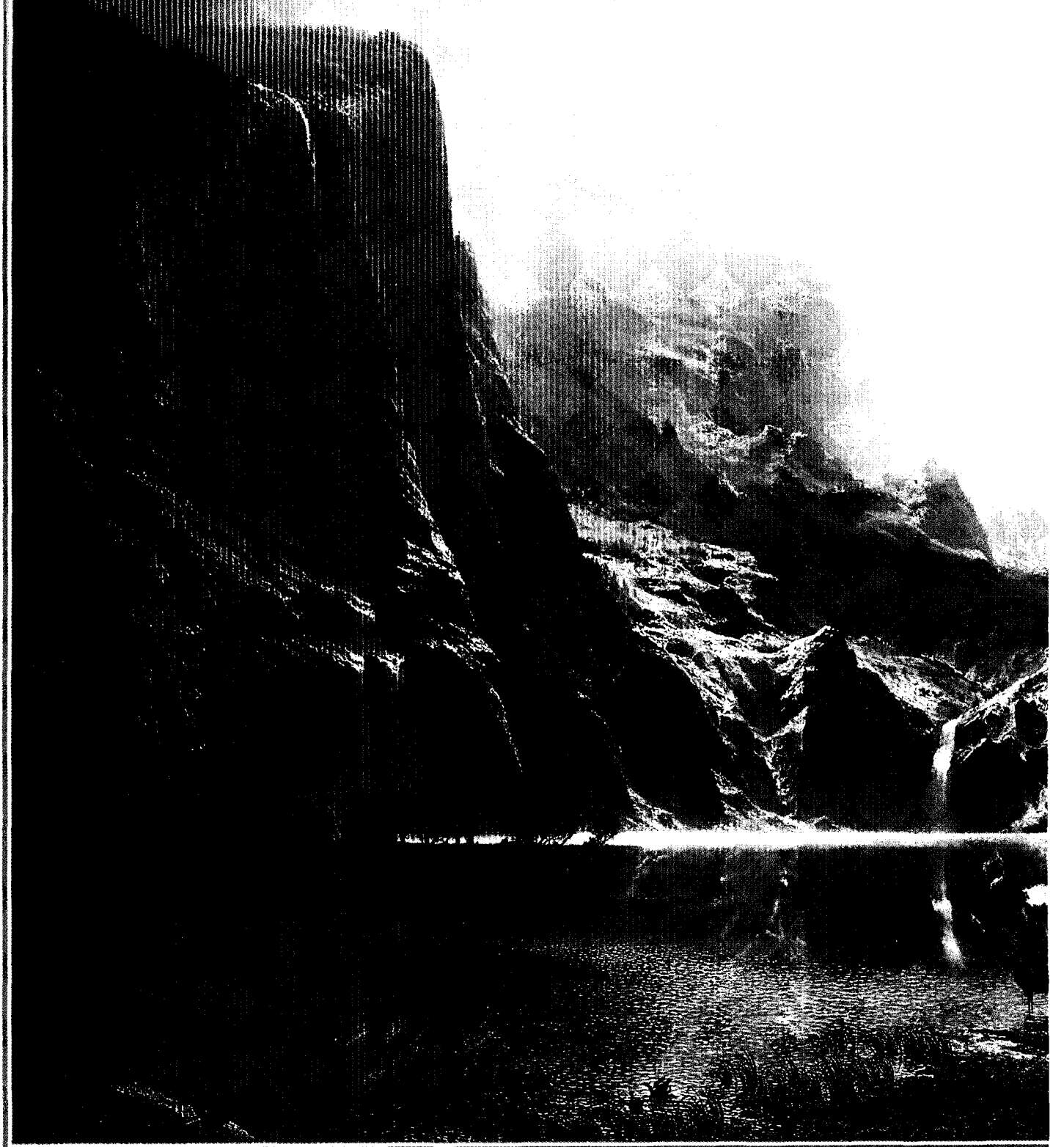

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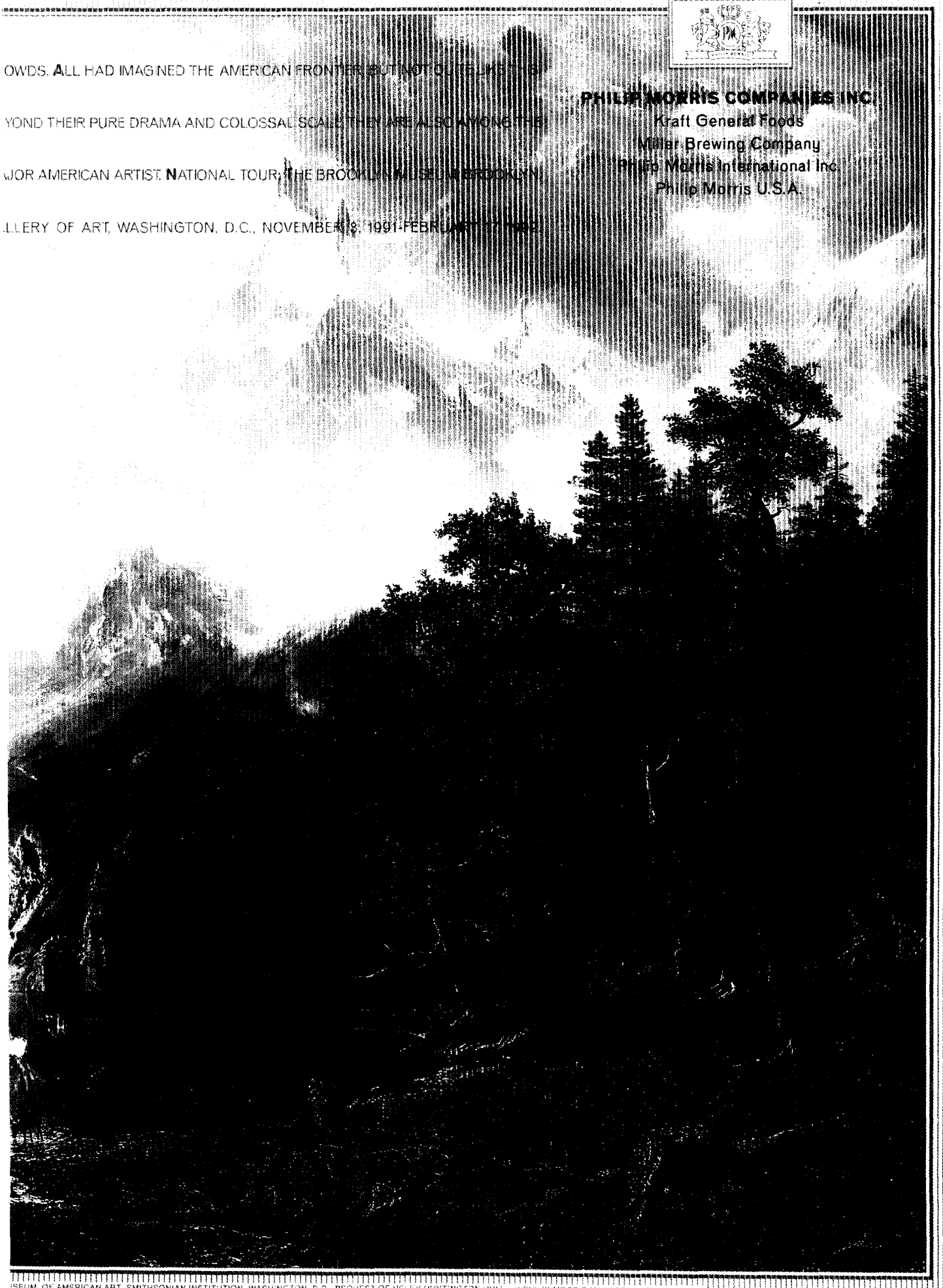

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came from an impoverished background, expectations for them were low.

Take the class play. Every class at P.S. 98 had to put on a play. For some teachers, this amounted to little more than herding the kids onstage and having them dance to canned music. When my turn came, my mentor teacher, Vera Kohn, said: "They'll write their own." I remember thinking, "They will?" A master teacher with more than a decade of experience at P.S. 98, Vera was part of a citywide mentoring program designed to assist teachers through their initial year in the system. Vera observed and presented lessons, led me through a deluge of incomprehensible paperwork, offered invaluable advice. Her expectations were never too low.

Using a Beverly Cleary novel that we were reading, my class wrote advertising jingles for products they invented: the "turboburger" and the "protectoshield stinkmobile." ("It stinks when someone tries to steal it!") They composed rap songs about the perils of smoking. They painted elaborate props. When I showed the videotape to a friend, he said: "You know, most people wouldn't think these kids could do this."

The play's success made me feel like Jaime Escalante for a couple of days. But I wasn't a great teacher. Vera was a great teacher. I was OK. But there were some teachers at P.S. 98—teachers with five, ten, fifteen years of experience in the system—who were not OK. I don't mean that they weren't creative. I mean they were awful—which is why complaints about TFAers' relative inexperience or weak commitment are so hard to take seriously.

During my preps, I'd often sit at my desk at the back of the room. One teacher who took over my class began: "I'm not going to start until you're quiet." But the class *was* quiet. (Maybe one student was whispering.) Of course, after twenty minutes of saying this over and over again, the class really wasn't quiet. She never began the lesson. Forty-five minutes later she told my class as she left: "I'm disappointed in you." During the Gulf war, the same teacher presented a lesson in which she asked my kids to pretend that they were prisoners of war *and were being tortured.* What was it like? Another instructor became sidetracked by a discussion of left- and right-handers. "If you write with your left hand, you're gonna die young! Gotta change *quick!* Or you'll be *dead* before you know it!" Tears welled up in Jose C.'s eyes. He whispered to me from where he was sitting: "But Miss Mosle, I don't know *how* to write with my right hand . . . "

Another teacher said nothing. On one side of the board he wrote the five food groups. On the other, the steps for writing a book report. There were no books. No instructions. No explanations for the juxtaposition. He just cynically filled the board in case a principal walked in. One kid asked of no one in particular: "Are we supposed to copy this down?" By the end of the lesson, the kids were taunting him: "You're *Bad*man." "You're a *bad* teacher." Yet they couldn't even provoke him. One teacher writing a letter to the Board of Education about the neglect of black history in the curriculum pointed to a picture of a man in a book and asked me, mispronouncing his name, if he was still alive. It was Thurgood Marshall. (He was still a Supreme Court justice at the time.) But at least this person genuinely cared about her students. She wasn't a bad teacher. A few, however, were simply hateful, screaming, "You're stupid!" at the kids.

Every teacher has bad days—days when you are less prepared, when you lose your temper, when you flub your lines. But there were some teachers at the school who were notorious for their incompetence, for their contempt for the children. All but one of them are still there.

In the New York City public school system every teacher is supposed to undergo a formal, unannounced observation twice a year. Mark Shapiro, the principal, usually conducted second observations for first-year teachers. I was observed once, by Richard, in October. At the end of the year I received a rating sheet, which had more than a dozen categories on which I was supposed to be marked. The sheet was blank. At the bottom of the page was one box in which the letter "S" had been typed: Satisfactory. That's as good as it gets. There are only two ratings: Satisfactory, Unsatisfactory. You can see, though, why no one bothers to rate teachers more carefully. Principals can't hire and fire by merit anyway. Even an unsatisfactory rating won't get you fired.

Only two people at P.S. 98 really knew if I was a good teacher: Richard and Vera, who spent at least a few moments in my classroom almost every day. I doubt I exchanged fifteen words with Mark the whole year. He had no idea if I could teach. It's as though he wasn't even there. Richard, on the other hand, was always there: to back you up on a discipline matter, to intervene with a parent, to raise your standards, to suggest a new approach. Richard wasn't superhuman, just aggressively competent. He and Vera would listen to you bellyache about all the impossible conditions—they might even agree—but then they'd say, "Yes, but *you* can still improve . . . " And then they'd show you how: How to teach a science lesson using cooperative learning. How to break down long division into four simple steps your students could understand. How to set up an incentive system in your classroom. A week later they'd ask you, "How'd it go?"

Two mundane things would have made life easier at P.S. 98. One was access to a Xerox machine. I often spent $40 of my own money each week on photocopies alone. Another was access to a translator. All of my students spoke English, but many of their parents did not, and I don't speak Spanish. Consequently, writing notes home or calling parents was more difficult. In Los Angeles, where I student-taught, schools with large Hispanic populations were required to provide translators for their staff. Sixteen-hundred Spanish-speaking kids at P.S. 98—and



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not one official translator. Oh, you could get around the language barrier. During the day I'd bug other teachers or Millie, one of the school's secretaries: "Just one little call?" But you could do this only so much. After school another parent might translate, but your subtle exhortations about the importance of homework would be reduced to two words. Or the kids would translate. I'd say, "Erllica is disrupting my class." Erllica would say something to her father. Her father would nod and smile. Vera said, "Never let kids translate!" But sometimes there wasn't a choice. Even at the two annual teacher-parent conferences, translators were in short supply. What was the point of meeting with a kid's parents if you couldn't communicate with them?

When I asked one teacher how he managed to call his kids' parents, he confided, "I don't." Never? I couldn't believe it. He knew it was wrong, but he just shrugged. It's shameful to admit, but nearly all the parents I got to know well spoke at least some English. I had contact with the others, but not as much. Even one full-time translator would have helped.

## IV.

Inwood is a working-class neighborhood. The vast majority of my kids' parents worked—often more than one job. They worked in bodegas, they worked at the local beauty parlor, they worked in factories or sweatshops, they made beds at fancy downtown hotels, a few were taking classes at CUNY. But that doesn't mean my kids' parents were making "working-class" wages. They were all poor.

Nearly all the kids at P.S. 98 qualified for the free lunch program. You'd read their lunch forms and wonder how their families did it: there'd be four kids and one parent making $150 week, $175 a week, never more. Sharing their tiny two-room apartment somewhere might be an elderly grandfather just in from Santo Domingo. Compared with relatives in the Dominican Republic, to whom they were often sending money, my kids' parents were rich. They could afford to be generous.

In one lesson on "How to write a business letter," I had my kids write to their landlords to request repairs. The complaints were all the same: "My bathtub has gotten old and I can't take a bath because it has broken to little pieces. Could you fix it?" "We don't have no water and the ceiling is caving in." "We don't have het [heat] in my Building. We are cold at night." "Whenever the rain fall it leaks.... It has caused us a lot of inconvenience."

Families often made up in neatness for what they lacked in wealth. One Saturday afternoon I went to Eligio's "house." He was my "star of the month," and I was taking him to lunch. Eligio shared his apartment with his mother, who was disabled, and with a sister and an uncle. The uncle wasn't there. He was working. "He's *always* working," Eligio said. His mother gestured me inside. The apartment was one room, about twelve feet by fifteen feet. The walls were painted a pretty sky blue. Dividing the room in half was a purple chiffon curtain. Tiny china devotional objects were neatly arranged, like acolytes, around a portrait of Jesus. There was a chair and a sofa covered in plastic. They had fancy faux-Louis XIV legs.

Asked to describe their home lives, my kids would say, "Boring." It was a complaint I heard over and over again. Apartments were too small for playing, and many parents would not let their children out on the streets. Kids seldom saw one another after school. Parents were working, or a newborn was garnering all the attention. One evening this September, one of my ex-students called. It was her birthday. No one had remembered. She was 10 years old.

Trapped in their apartments with nothing to do, my students would watch TV—for hours. Ask my kids to name someone they admire and they would name someone on TV. Not an actor or actress, but a *character.* What did they want to be when they grew up? On TV. It sounded like a place one might move to, like Chicago. Have them draw a scene from history and all the figures would look like Bart Simpson. Bart on the *Mayflower.* Bart on the "underground railroad." Ask them to imagine something scary and you'd get the plot to *Child's Play 3.* When I asked my students to describe a talent they had, "My talent," wrote one, "is TV." There was no point mentioning this to parents. They were watching it too.

Like parents, my students used to worry about me. At the beginning of the year, they would ask: "Are you married, Miss Mosle?" Then, "When are you going to get married?" By the end of the year they were getting discouraged: "Won't you *ever* get married?" One day one student exclaimed: "She can't get married. She's not pregnant yet."

About half the kids in my class came from single-parent homes, which is also to say that half did not. But one hardly ever saw "the single parent" at P.S. 98. You saw the extended family, or you saw no one at all. Write a note home because Jorge wasn't doing his homework and the next day the entire family might be outside your door: the grave father, the smart older brother, who was there to translate, the baby sister in tow, the infant in swaddling clothes. Or it might be a grandmother and grandson. Others, you'd write a zillion notes home and you'd never see anyone. A few wouldn't even show up at the two annual parent-teacher conferences—until the school threatened to report them to social services.

But talking with a parent didn't always mean that things at home were OK. Midyear, I began to suspect that one of my smartest students, whom I'll call Juan, was involved in the drug trade. He wore lots of gold and fancy clothes. After school he hung out with guys twice his age. One December night one of them pulled out a wad of money. It was several inches thick. So Richard, Vera, and I invited the mother in. Oh, she understood our concerns. She understood them all too well. She was a blizzard of words. "A smoke screen,"



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Richard judged: "The family is involved." Then Juan wrote his "tag," a graffiti signature often associated with gangs, on the bathroom wall. Another meeting. Very reasonable. Another flurry of words. But as we all stood up to go, Juan's mother suddenly leaned over to Juan. She was right in his face. She was whispering: "I'm gonna *fuck* with you, Juan. I'm gonna *fuck* with you. You hear me? I'm gonna *fuck* with you. You *fuck* up and I'm gonna *fuck* with you." Each "fuck" was like a little slap. Juan stared straight ahead. One day during a vocabulary game, I was giving clues to a word. (The word was "margarine.") First clue: "It's something that you use every day." Juan's hand shot up: "An excuse?"

Most of my kids' parents, however, were decent, hard-working people simply struggling to get by. They were concerned about their children's future and about their own. One night, just before the Gulf war began, I noticed Maggie's father lingering after dismissal. It was dark and had begun to sleet. The parking lot where we were standing looked lacquered. Could he ask me a question? He had family members in the Gulf. He had been listening to the radio, and President Bush had used a word he hadn't understood. He pulled out a little piece of paper on which he had written the word. Did I know what it meant? The word was "chastisement."

## V.

Teaching is a lonely profession. Some days I'd approach P.S. 98 like a prisoner returning from a weekend furlough. By the end of the year I must have looked pretty disreputable: I couldn't get the chalk out of my clothes. I loved teaching and the kids, but there wasn't much solidarity at P.S. 98. Morale was low. My classroom was like a cell in solitary confinement. A small band of us would occasionally steal a few moments in Richard's office—exchanging teaching tips like cigarettes—before the p.m. session began. But days would pass in which I had virtually no contact with another adult.

Although I can imagine having taught in New York City without Teach for America or the summer training program, I cannot imagine having taught without the support of Richard and Vera. I was lucky. Among Teach for America teachers with whom I spoke, the greatest single complaint was not insufficient preparation, or "conditions," but lack of support in their schools. This is where ed schools go wrong: one needs far less preparation before one starts teaching and far more support after. Indeed, the only effective antidote to the 25 percent dropout rate among first-year teachers in New York City has been the mentoring program. It was eliminated last June.

For what it is, Teach for America has been a success. In its first year the program sent 489 teachers to six sites: New York, Los Angeles, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and rural parts of North Carolina and Georgia. Although some recruits have dropped out, attrition rates have remained far below those of most of the beleaguered school districts where corps members were sent. Still, it's important to remember exactly what Teach for America is. There are roughly 2.3 million public school teachers in the United States—65,000 in New York City alone. Including this year's recruits, which have swelled TFA's ranks to nearly 1,200, the program will account for less than 0.06 percent of all public school teachers nationwide. (It would take 23,000 teachers just to raise that figure to 1 percent.) Teach for America isn't a point of light. It's a pinprick. Unless such programs become more than models, which the system at large is incapable of duplicating, they will always remain marginal.

TFA's experience in New York City has been sobering. After only one year, the program has abandoned New York because of the city's budget woes. (It sent only a handful of bilingual corps members to the city this fall.) The teacher shortage that I had been recruited to alleviate evaporated even before my first year had ended. Last December the city's budget crisis suddenly raised the ghastly specter of midyear layoffs. For nearly two months I taught under the assumption that I'd be among thousands axed on February 1. It was nothing personal. Layoffs accorded strictly with seniority—calculated, in some cases, to the day. Even after the city only narrowly avoided midyear layoffs, Mark Shapiro told me that he seriously doubted there would be a teaching position for me in the fall: "If I were you, I'd start looking for another job now." I was glad I did. P.S. 98 "excessed" more than a dozen teachers last June.

Over the summer the city encouraged more than 4,000 people—this time, its more experienced teachers and principals—to retire early to avoid additional layoffs. Incapable of retaining teachers on the basis of merit, the system is talent-blind, wielding budget cuts like a blunt instrument that hacks away at good and bad alike. The massive exodus threw schools into chaos this fall, as teachers, in an elaborate system called "bumping," jockeyed for remaining jobs. Those with the most seniority could "bump," or displace, teachers with less seniority who held coveted positions. Those in turn could "bump" other teachers. This went on in some schools for weeks after classes had begun. Until the dust had settled, principals weren't sure if they had openings in their schools or not. Consequently, at the very last moment (and sometimes after) schools had to scramble to rehire some of the same teachers they had laid off only a few months before.

*Postscript*: On Thursday, September 12, a day after classes had begun in New York City, Richard Spero called to say that a space had suddenly opened up for a first-grade teacher at P.S. 98. Could I take it? I'd have to start that day. I already had another job at this point. Even if I agreed to go back there was no guarantee that I wouldn't later be bumped. I had never been in a first-grade classroom. With the mentor program cut, Vera wouldn't be there. Richard wouldn't be my supervisor. I said no. •



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# BOOKS & The Arts

## *Stanley Kauffmann on Films*

### Opera Lovers

No doubt about it. The trouble with filmmaking around the world is the gap between writing ability and executant ability—directing, acting, cinematography, editing, design, and so forth. There's always more of the latter than the former. I've noted it often, and the list on this page is a constant reminder. Writing talent is the scarcest of film talents. Perhaps in economically straitened times like the present, originality and adventure aren't wanted. But neither, apparently, is good judgment. Every month brings films based on screenplays that someone thought—quite mistakenly—were worth the talent, let alone the money, spent on them.

The latest proof of the gap: **Meeting Venus** (Warner Bros.). What a well-made film. Almost everything in it is excellently done. It has rich texture, full of flavor. But who approved the story at the center—the feeble, trite story?

The director, Istvan Szabó, who made *Mephisto* and *Colonel Redl*, has shown he is (to speak only of his directing) an accomplished man. Here he's even better. From first moment to last, his film pulses with purpose, wit, bitterness. The locus is the opera world—the Paris opera; and Szabó spills out the natural history of the inhabitants of that world. We see the opera house as a gallery of varied national characteristics and political histories, as a pressure cooker for varied sexual drives, for rivalries and schemings. Szabó makes this world reveal its secrets to us with elegance and frankness.

The cinematographer is Lajos Koltai, who has worked with Szabó several times and who also did Gábor's *Angi Vera*. He knows everything there is to know about lighting faces, and here he chooses the right tones for this essentially romantic setting. But compliments and gratitude could be heaped on everyone connected with the film's making, including (with one exception) the cast.

It's the center of the screenplay, the central story garlanded with this delightful texture, that is ludicrously bad. It was written by Szabó himself and Michael Hirst. A Hungarian conductor, played by Niels Arestrup, arrives in Paris to prepare and conduct a special production of *Tannhäuser* for theater presentation and simultaneous TV broadcast. He is married, with a wife and child in Budapest. The soprano who is to sing Elisabeth (Glenn Close) is unmarried. She dislikes the conductor at first, which makes us apprehensive about what's to come; and sure enough it does come. They fall in love. This leads to the stalest of complications, between the lovers themselves and vis-à-vis his wife.

It's as if at some point in the writing, Szabó and Hirst recognized that they had provided the opera house turmoil, a lively seething savory context, and that now they needed something in the middle. So they reached for the first complication that came to hand on the plot shelf behind them.

Sample of badness: the script contrives to give Close a *lieder* recital in Budapest during the *Tannhäuser* rehearsal period in Paris, a bit of mechanics to provide a confrontation with Mrs. Conductor. Arestrup visits his family during this break. Wife and soprano meet. Wife sees truth. A fierce quarrel then explodes between Arestrup and his wife. (It's the best scene in this "main" story. The wife is trenchantly played by Dorottya Udvaros.) Close breaks with Arestrup. He then goes to her hotel and pounds on her door until the Budapest police come and take him away. Back in Paris he stands under her window and caterwauls until the Parisian police come. There's no report of this, apparently, in either Budapest or Paris newspapers.

Reconciled, Close and Arestrup are at a dinner party when she bursts out in a public rhapsody of affection for him. He withdraws, she follows. He berates her for making him look ridiculous. This *after* his own grotesque behavior in Budapest and Paris.

*Meeting Venus* had a producer and several sponsors. Didn't any of them read the script?

Arestrup, French despite his Danish name, is a noted actor-director in the Paris theater, who has appeared in films for Resnais and Lelouch, among others. He is not an immediate dynamic force, but he has intelligence and gravity, and he certifies his presence as a member of the human race. Amid the moribund plottings in which he is trapped, this helps.

Most of the picture is spoken in English, with a lacing of Hungarian and other languages (all subtitled). If it seems odd to pick a Frenchman to play

### FILMS WORTH SEEING

**Antonia and Jane.** *Bright and witty. Two young women in London today, their sex and other lives. Written, directed, and acted with intelligence. (Reviewed 12/2/91)* **La Belle Noiseuse.** *Jacques Rivette's adaptation of Balzac's "Unknown Masterpiece." Four hours long and worth it. Michel Piccoli as a painter, Emanuelle Béart as his nude model in a discerning study of artistic process. (11/4/91)* **City of Hope.** *John Sayles's best film sears through modern urban sleaze. The script tends to melodrama, but the directing and acting are taut. (10/14/91)* **Year of the Gun.** *John Frankenheimer catches the turbulence of Rome in the year of the Aldo Moro crime. The plot of this thriller is unexceptional, but the environment is stark and strong. (11/18/91)* **—SK**



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a Hungarian in English, the director chose a Swede, Erland Josephson, to play the Spanish manager of this French company (which Josephson does with shrewdness). Among the many other characters who swirl and dart around the central figures—all of them colorful—Macha Meril, aging and increasingly beauteous, is outstanding as a Russian on the opera-house staff.

The question mark in the cast is Close. Of course we know by now that not all opera sopranos look like Monserrat Caballé, but there is no suggestion in Close's bearing, more especially in her breathing, that she is a singer. (Her Elisabeth voice is supplied by Kiri Te Kanawa. Comparable singers supply the voices for the other "singers" whom we see.) Why didn't Close study Edith Clever's Kundry in Syberberg's *Parsifal* to learn how an actress can play a singer singing?

Since appearance is part of performance, I note that Close has never looked less attractive than she does here with fairly short hair. Koltai does what he can, but he can work only with what he is given.

The production of *Tannhäuser*, like all of the film, was designed by Attila Kovács and Catherine Leterrier. In contrast to the gold-and-red ambiance of the opera house itself, the production is stark, postmodernist. The Venusberg is gray and plain with a neon phallus at center. The male bacchanalians wear modern briefs, the females are in black bras, black panties, black garter belts and stockings.

We never see more of the full production (we see the above only at a rehearsal). A stage managers' strike keeps the curtain down on opening night, so the singers perform on the apron. In Act Three the returning pilgrims—in miners' clothes, with lamps and smudged faces—come down the aisles of the theater bearing the pope's staff, now bursting with green leaves. (Nice touch: we get a fanciful quick glimpse of the conductor's baton burst into leaf.)

These matters, like all the musical matters in the film, are well handled. True, at the very first rehearsal Arestrup is given some thundering banalities to speak to the company about *Tannhäuser*, its conflict between sexuality and spirituality, but probably these remarks are intended equally as a preface to the conductor-diva affair. (Which ends more ambiguously than the opera itself.)

And the broad, generous handling of the music had an additional effect. I thought I'd never want to see *Tannhäuser* again. Changed my mind. I'd even like to see this film's production. •


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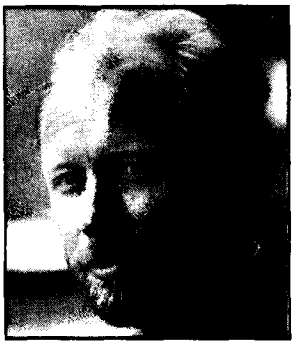

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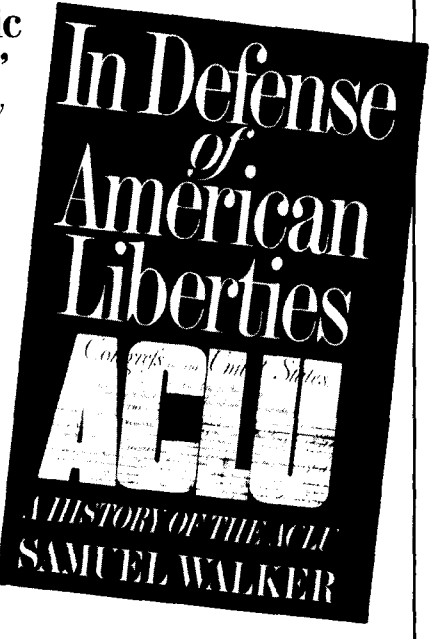


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# Robert Brustein on Theater

## Memories of Joe

Joe Papp didn't want the world to know that for years he had been suffering from an incurable cancer. Though the media respected his wishes, everyone in theater knew he was dying; and when his son succumbed to AIDS last spring at the age of 29, Joe's intimates knew that he couldn't last much longer. A few days before he died, the Jujamcyn organization, in one of those pre-mortem testimonials people were hurriedly trying to give him, presented an award to the New York Public Theater. Some thought that Joe would come to pick it up, despite his condition, if only because he had always made a point of accepting awards in person. Joe failed to appear—guests at the event were told he had just broken a collarbone. His organs were failing, his bones were crumbling. He was said to be in incredible pain. The celebratory speeches took on the quality of a memorial service.

Still, when the news of his death was finally published, it struck many as incredible, inconceivable. If a single quality could be said to characterize Joe Papp (who always seemed ageless), it was vitality, a word, deriving from the Latin for "strength" and "life," that cannot accommodate the qualities of stillness and silence. It seems hardly possible that we will no longer see Joe facing the cameras on the steps of the Public, or at some congressional hearing on the state of the arts, or after the opening of one of his shows, praising or denouncing or exhorting on the obligations of theater to society in that snappy, scrappy, belligerent, barking voice.

I was not a close friend. How could I be, as his occasional critic and theatrical competitor? But our feelings for each other when we met were warm and cordial, though not without formality. He always called me "Robert," eyeing me with the wariness of a wolf leader checking the rest of the pack. I think that Joe also tended to distrust intellectuals, probably because of his lack of formal education and because of his populist convictions. The Brooklyn-born son of Yiddish-speaking working-class parents, he believed that theater was for the young, the poor, and the disadvantaged; and he took it as his mission to transport it to them, sometimes literally, on the backs of mobile touring units reaching black and Hispanic audiences. Shakespeare in the Park—perhaps his greatest contribution to the American theater—was intended from its inception as a free gift to the public. And although this concept led to a celebrated battle with Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, who didn't want the rabble trampling his Central Park flora, it was central to Papp's democratic belief, derived from audiences at Shakespeare's Globe, that theater belonged to the people.

Papp's benevolence did not extend, however, to all the people. He harbored little respect for critics, and he once threw John Simon out of his theater. He also had an ill-disguised contempt for the well-heeled, middle-aged theatergoer. These feelings were expressed more openly when he took over the Vivian Beaumont at Lincoln Center, and he invoked them later as a reason for abandoning it. Ironically, for all his efforts, Papp's audiences continued to be predominantly middle class. (So were Brecht's, despite similar social convictions.) At the Public, if not in the Park, he was more likely to attract the faithful theatergoer that used to go to Broadway—unless he did a racial or an ethnic play. Then his audiences became more diverse, and he never condescended to them, never underestimated their capacity to absorb difficult works. Papp, in Chekhov's words, tried "to bring the people up to Gogol, not Gogol down to the people." And among his most effective methods was the way he tried to refresh and reinvigorate Shakespeare production.

One of my earliest reviews, as theater critic for this magazine, was a 1960 notice of *Taming of the Shrew* in the Park, directed by Papp's close associate Gerald Freedman. The production's boisterous, irreverent, indigenous approach to a familiar classic instantly delivered us from years of enslavement to British models. After a glowing tribute, I paid Papp my respects in person, not mentioning that, in my acting days, I had once auditioned before him for the part of Richard III. (I experienced the typical actor's chagrin when the role went to an unknown named George C. Scott.) At that interview I was again struck by his strong personality and his darkly handsome appearance. He reminded me of a '30s movie actor, a peppy version of John Garfield, with his compact frame, regular features, and mellow, punchy voice, so redolent of the street. Like many who end up administering theater, he was initially a performer, and later he had the opportunity to realize his own histrionic talents in public with a rousing cabaret act.

Some years later I invited him to teach at the Yale School of Drama. It was 1966, and Papp was down on his luck. Funding for the theater had hit one of its recurrent dips, and Joe was thinking of closing down operations. I asked him to supervise our student directors, and to stage a play himself with the professional theater that we were preparing to form. After some reluctance he agreed, a little daunted by Yale but instinctively drawn to a pedagogical opportunity. A short time later he acquired the Astor Library on Lafayette Street and initiated the New York Public Theater with productions of *Hair* and *Hamlet*. Despite his new obligations, Papp partially fulfilled his teaching commitments, alternating classes with Freedman, and before long he had abducted our prize students to become resident directors at the Public—Ted Cornell, Jeff Bleckner, and later A. J. Antoon.

Joe visited New Haven many times after that, sometimes as an instructor, more often as a scout. He had an affectionate eye for young talent, and many of our graduates (as well as many from our professional company) found their way to the Public, among them such playwrights as Robert Montgomery, Christopher Durang, Albert Innaurato, Keith Reddin, and Harry Kondoleon, and such actors as Meryl Streep, Joe Grifasi, Sigourney Weaver, Izzy Munk, Christine Estabrook, Mark Lynn-Baker, Ben Halley, and William Converse Roberts. The scenic artist Santo Loquasto, along with many Yale-trained scenic, costume, and lighting designers, soon became Papp regulars as well. It is often noted that the list of people who worked with Joe includes just about every gifted theater artist in America. What a permanent company he could have built with the treasures at his command!

In fact, Papp regularly announced the formation of such a company: it remained one of his great unfulfilled dreams. Also unfulfilled was his plan to build a theater for playwrights on Broadway, where their work would be



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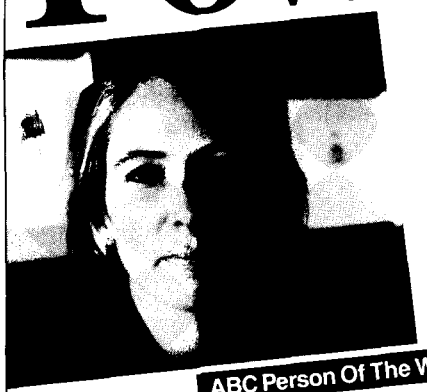

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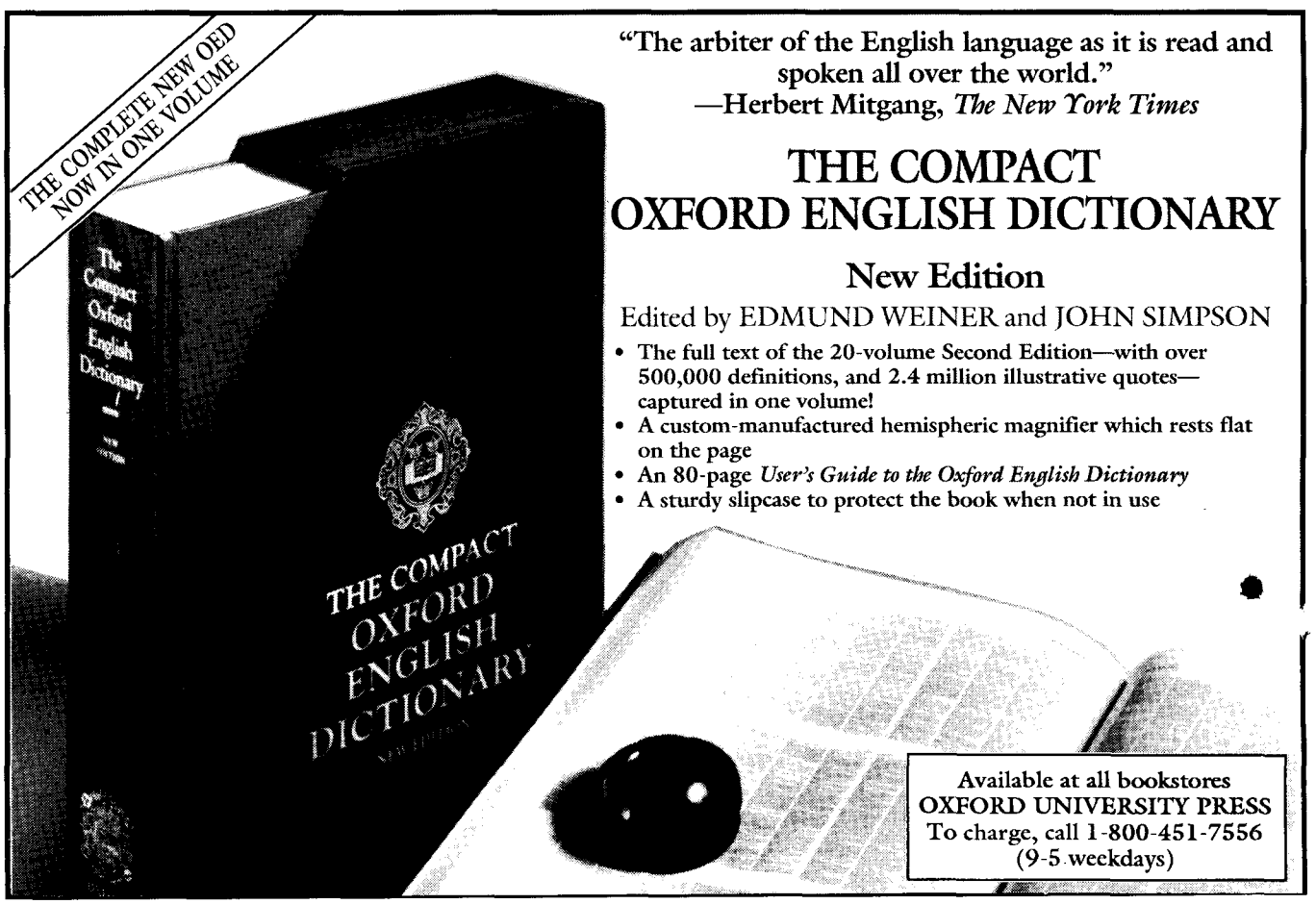
carefully produced without interference from timid producers or spoilsport critics. Like most American entrepreneurial empire-builders, Joe always had a lot of great ideas up his sleeve. He was in terror of stagnation, and rather than consolidate he always preferred to expand. The Public had five theaters, which were almost always filled, and he generally had one or two transfers (*A Chorus Line* being the most celebrated) sitting on Broadway stages. His greatest performances, however, may have been his frequent press conferences, where he invariably announced new directions.

The one that he came closest to realizing—it may yet prove his real legacy—was the Shakespeare Marathon, a plan to produce the entire canon of thirty-seven plays in the space of less than a decade. Joe took a lot of knocks for this massive undertaking, and the last years of his life were marked by a distinct decline in his reputation. Following the AIDS-related death of his chosen successor, Wilford Leach, he turned to a great variety of directors to help him realize his mission, among them Stuart Vaughan, Gerald Freedman, Liviu Ciulei, James Lapine, Harold Gruskin, Kevin Kline, Steven Berkoff, A.J. Antoon, Joe Dowling, Michael Greif, and JoAnne Akalaitis. Some of these productions were a lot more impressive than the reviews indicated.

Lacking a permanent company of actors, or a unifying directorial imagination, however, they lacked an overall style. Still, if that was a weakness of the New York Shakespeare Festival, it was also a strength, because it allowed Papp free rein to pick new crops. The theater was always run according to his taste and his faith in talent, and so the offerings varied wildly, from the most commercial to the most arcane. Michael Bennett could find a home at the Public for developing *A Chorus Line*, but so could Mabou Mines for developing *The Dead End Kids*. Papp was able to operate at the same time as the most successful producer on Broadway and as a primary New York facilitator for the avant-garde. No wonder the press began to identify him as the very personification of the American theater in our time.

Like most paternalistic figures, Joe had family squabbles. The authors of those "hunchback" plays, as he called the works of his favorite playwrights to describe their lack of popular appeal, began to chafe under Papp's proprietary control and sometimes capricious absolutism—first, the Public's resident playwright David Rabe, who left the family in anger, and then Sam Shepard, who repudiated the Public Theater production of *True West* after Papp fired the director and took over himself. In the most painful of these quarrels, Papp broke off with Bernard Gersten, his long-term managing director and closest friend, in a dispute over whether to produce Bennett's *Ballroom*. When Papp rejected the musical for the Public, Gersten took it to Broadway, and Papp announced he would never speak to him again. Gersten often attempted to repair the breach, once paying a visit to Joe's cabaret performance in the Village, where Papp refused to acknowledge his presence in the audience or open his dressing room door. It was not until years later, when Papp was near death, and Gersten was helping to nurse him, that the two estranged friends managed to renew their old bonds.

Joe wasn't too happy with me either, owing to an article I wrote in 1974 called "News Theatre," which criticized his current impulse to make headlines as well as art. I questioned the cult of personality that had made Papp the biggest star in his theater while speculating on the consequences of his glori-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fication by the media. He was especially rankled by my quotation from Daniel Boorstin on the subject of the celebrity hero: "The newspapers make him, and they unmake him—not by murder but by suffocation and starvation." Joe replied in an angry letter: "The artistic product is my news. The attempt to broaden the audience for new plays is my news. Finding and producing new writers is my news. Introducing and developing new directors, designers, and actors is my news. Raising funds for all these is my news." I now believe that, despite a tendency to imprint his own personality on his theater, a tendency identified more with commercial enterprise than with nonprofit activity, Joe eventually managed to avoid the traps of celebrity and stick to his declared purpose, "to create a meaningful theater for popular audiences." But I also believe that, as Boorstin prophesied, the media abandoned him in the last years of his life, which were characterized, if not by "suffocation and starvation," then by an indifferent and even hostile climate for his work.

Before his death, he made news again by turning down a substantial NEA grant rather than sign the new obscenity clause. But aside from praise for that courageous gesture, he was the subject of considerable opprobrium. The Shakespeare Marathon was, for the most part, attacked by the daily press; most of the Public offerings were dismissed; and he was criticized for naming Akalaitis, a controversial avant-garde director, as his successor rather than someone more in the mainstream. Although Papp was rumored to have harbored second thoughts about that appointment, it was just one more proof of his unpredictability, and of the way he loved to pull the noses of the critical fraternity.

Tributes to Papp began to accumulate before he died, especially from those who had savaged him the most. Inevitably, *A Chorus Line*, which he regarded as an annuity for doing more important work, was singled out as his greatest achievement. As one who also criticized Joe from time to time, but always loved and respected him, I see how hard it is to pay appropriate homage to a man who meant so much to so many—audiences of every class and color, people of every age, artists of every persuasion. The American theater has suffered many indignities and many humiliations in the past ten years, but none hurts worse than the loss of Joe Papp. •


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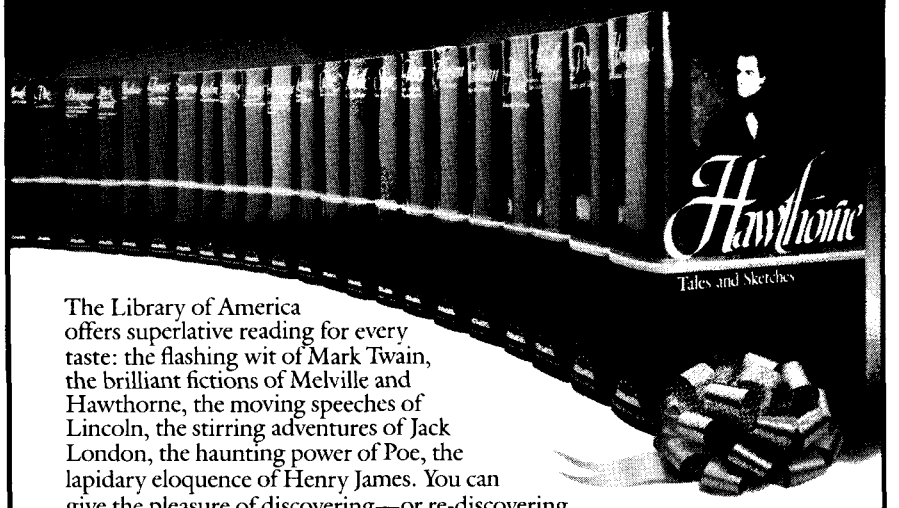


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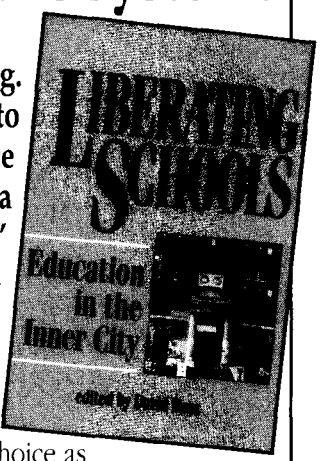


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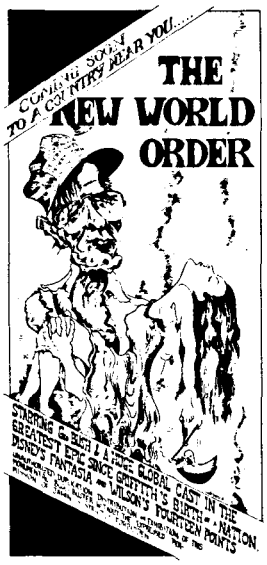


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**Painting and the end of communism.**

# *Brushes with Death*

**BY AVIGDOR ARIKHA**

At first glance, communism and modernism are antithetical. Art is a subjective need for a singular expression, experienced subjectively by individual viewers, even if its content is "objective"; but the objective solution to individual lives, imposed by the Communist utopia, could not possibly tolerate such singularities. And yet many artists believed in a new form of art that would redeem mankind jointly with communism, and wished to serve it; artists such as Tatlin or Lissitzky and the Russian Constructivists, but also many others, aspired to a social utility for their art, and some Communist leaders, such as Trotsky, were favorable to it. The official honeymoon between communism and modernism, however, lasted a short time, and with Trotsky's fall it ended in the Soviet Union. Lenin detested modern art, and so did Stalin.

Communism and modernism had something in common, though: each of them was an ideology and became a faith. Both developed a sort of clergy, and ultimately an inquisition: commissars and apparatchiks for the Communist state, theorists and curators for the modernist movement. The commissars served communism with the same devotion with which the clergy served the Church, while the modernist creed was proselytized and imposed by its believers with the same rigidity with which the ancient Egyptian priesthood imposed its hieratic style, to the exclusion of all other styles.

The final collapse of the Communist state system in 1991 (only China and Cuba remain as survivors) does not seem to have altogether affected the prestige of utopian ideologies in general, and certainly not in the arts. After all, idealism in the arts, that is, the precedence of style over truth, goes back to the Platonic concept of ideal beauty: natural truth had to yield to the idea of beauty, and individual expression to a rationalized style. This subservience of truth to an accepted style remained dormant in modernism, in spite of the disappearance of the notion of ideal beauty.

Coinciding with the discovery of relativity, modernist painting became a reduction to the very act of painting, to the purity of its means, abandoning subject matter as total representation (taken over by film) for the sake of pure form. And when it did not serve a religious or political cult, it gradually became a cult in itself, with pure abstraction the article of its faith. Modernism started as a liberation movement in the arts on an unprecedented scale. It is now fragmented into a myriad of small cults, each cult with its own clergy. The modernist ideal, in short, declined into avant-gardism.

This decline occurred after the first cubist experience, and it was essentially a conversion of the modern heirs of a timeless pictorial legacy to the idea of the absolute work of art, according to which the link with that tradition could at last be totally severed: no more life drawing, no more painting from nature, no more criterion of excellence. The various "thou shalt nots" of the avant-garde were subsequently carried further by the Surrealists (though not by such artists as Arp or Miró), who abolished syntax, introduced automatic writing, condemned logic, glorified madness. The avant-garde proceeded by prohibitions; and those individuals who simply excelled in their talent, and attempted to carry the pictorial tradition into their own time, were condemned as remnants of the past or misfits of modern culture (as, for example, Edward Hopper was disdained in the heyday of abstract expressionism).

The avant-gardist wave of the early 1960s abandoned the preoccupation with the plastic purity of means. The work of art as an "absolute" thing-in-itself was abandoned, as the use of ready-mades, or printed images, enabled some artists to dodge the strictly pictorial problems: a weakness in composition could be disguised by the collage of a printed image. "I think that the reaction to the painting of the last generation, which is generally believed to have been

AVIGDOR ARIKHA's new show of paintings will be at the Marlborough Gallery in New York this spring. He is the author of *Peinture et regard, Ecrits sur l'art 1965-1990* (Hermann).



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a highly subjective generation, is impersonality," said Claes Oldenburg in June 1964. This fascination with the impersonal was dictated by a belief in relative truth, or rather, by a disbelief in pictorial truth. By borrowing external images, the question of pictorial truth was disguised and bypassed. And so the restrictive zeal of modernism issued in a collapse of all restrictions; all expressions, even the most insipid, were valid, and could flourish in the name of the modernist, now he avant-gardist, idea.

Moreover, anything proclaimed to be an avant-garde work, according to a criterion of sheer novelty, was celebrated as such. But the pursuit of novelty, in the spirit of haute couture, is not about the invention of new forms (there are no new forms: "round is always round and square is always square," wrote Mondrian). It is about the invention of new looks, and it had the consequence of closing the gaps between art and everything that is not really art, but only craft, or entertainment. Starting with commercial art (a poster is not a painting, though a good poster is better than a bad painting), the utopia of novelty brought in window-dressing, carpentry, upholstery, lettering, and whatnot, proclaiming it all, even a heap of rubbish, to be art.

The contemporary assumption (in fact it goes all the way back to 1908, to the German theorist Wilhelm Worringer) appears to be that empathy in art is suspect, that the truly modern work cannot be liked immediately. Indeed, a negative first response to a work of art, a dislike of it and even an aversion to it, is perceived by the champions of "other criteria" as a positive sign. A painting that persuades and moves at first glance, by contrast, is considered skeptically, because of the mistrust in spontaneous recognition. Or rather, in the spontaneous recognition of timeless qualities. The spontaneous recognition of novelty is never censured.

But truth in art will never be proved by means other than itself. Truth in art is not relative, it is multiple, and usually it is unattainable. Therefore it is the search for truth that matters. When James Joyce was presented with the second Surrealist Manifesto, he asked the messenger, the poet René Crevel, whether he, Crevel, could justify each word in the manifesto, "because, in my writing, I can justify each syllable." In a painting, too, each square inch must be justifiable, that is, true. But its truth can only be recognized by a discerning individual through feeling and knowledge, and it can only be sensed subjectively, within the limits of personal taste.


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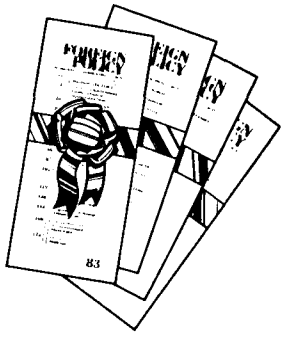

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Long before "political correctness" arose, "aesthetic correctness" was already at work. It has been exercising its tyranny for decades. It was the "poetic" tyranny practiced by André Breton, the founder of the Surrealist movement. He believed in the "independence of art—for the revolution," in the perpetual revolution. He "excommunicated" dissenters, and commanded and organized literary hit squads, practicing intimidation in the name of the Surrealist dogma. When a Parisian art dealer in the 1950s assembled an exhibition of Surrealist drawings of which Breton did not approve, a huge truck stopped in front of the gallery on the rue de Seine at the opening of the show and wooden mannequins were unloaded into the gallery, filling it from wall to wall so that there was no room for visitors—and then the devastated lady was presented with the bill.

Avant-gardism resembles an ideological party, in short, and its theorists (not necessarily the artists) are like commissars. Like communism, avant-gardism rejected the past as a paradigm. To be sure, the analogy has its strict limits: people were not physically forced to surrender their aesthetic judgment, let alone their lives. And of course stylistic pressure in the arts always existed: the sacerdotal, official, or collective style was always a menace to personal expression. Still, avant-gardist "correctness" and its links to fashion and/or politics created a new sort of pressure, unprecedented in its intensity precisely because it justified itself in the name of freedom. And so it was that otherwise knowledgeable and sensitive museum directors and curators, made vulnerable to the pressure of fashion, have been gradually converted to the dogmatists' cause, or have themselves been replaced by dogmatists. (One of them, at an inaugural exhibition at an important museum in New York, was heard to say that "the ones not included in this show should rethink their careers.")

If the manipulation of the aesthetic sense is as old as history, if tyrannies and dictatorships never tolerated personal taste, it is because personal taste is a pendant to personal liberty, and because Hitler and Stalin, like Ramses and Shalmaneser, grasped the power of visual communication. Contrary to the spoken word or the written word, the image is immediate. It is experienced emotionally, not rationally; hence its effect. Giotto's frescoes spoke more directly to the people than the preachers did.

Still, not every image has such power: behind the image is the form that makes it function. It is the form that reveals and amplifies the content. Alone, the image is like a bulb without electricity; alone, it is not yet art. The contemplation of a work of art is triggered by this "electricity," and it involves perception, empathy, discernment, and taste. And every individual has some latent personal taste.

Our age prides itself on its diversity, but it is no less marked by an abdication of personal taste. This abdication stands as a stark anomaly in an unprecedented period of personal liberty. Personal taste, a natural need denied in closed societies and flourishing in open ones, thrives now here and now there, investing some individuals with heightened aesthetic experiences, without which life would be lacking enlightenment, and the dimension of sublimity. The history of art, after all, is a history of exceptions, that is, a succession not of novelties, but of unique qualities. The uniqueness of a pictorial quality, however, cannot be sensed immediately; it needs time.

Modernism had a utopian dimension in its craving for the autonomous work of art, a creation in itself without any other reality than its own—an autonomy that ultimately opened the door to anything, including the arbitrary. And utopia is probably the oldest human dream, first put into writing by Isaiah. But the dream failed; a mishandled dream turned into a nightmarish reality. The era of utopian destruction in politics appears finally to be over. This great event should remind us of the difference between an ideal and its application. That difference is unbridgeable. The truth about utopia, it seems, is not only that it should not be turned into reality, but also that it cannot be turned into reality. •

# *Flaubert's Parrot*

**By Michael Levenson**

## Talking It Over by Julian Barnes

**(Knopf, 275 pp., $21)**

What's wrong with Julian Barnes? Why won't he wrestle with his angels? Doesn't he care? Is his gift so light a thing to him, so airy, so dispensable, so indifferent? Will he be cursed forever by the strong success that was *Flaubert's Parrot*? Will they always say, as I will say here, that he hasn't come close to repeating its quick intelligence, its stiff beauties?

Nothing seems clearer than that Barnes, for as long as he writes, will sheer from success to failure and back, and flutter erratically from flights in the upper air to bottom-bumping banality. For anyone who has been moved by his work, and this must include most who have read *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), he is a troubling case, too good to ignore, too inconsistent to revere; and like many such troubling cases, he teaches us something about the troubles of the rest of us.

You need not believe in a mystical Genius to feel that some among our species come wired for aptitude—a singing voice, a painting hand, a calculating head. By itself, the aptitude leaves no traces, spins no wheels, makes no art; it takes all the rest of life to find a circuit for these wires. This is what is true in our scholarly talk of how conventions and traditions guide, shape, liberate, and constrain the individual talent. But what has been growing clear for some time is that talent is under siege. The very idea that inborn aptitude will discover an artistic vocation, that together they will flourish and flower: this idea has come under forceful attack. The late history of the avant-garde has put talent itself in question. Say what you will, worry as you might, some of the most interesting painting of the last thirty years has had nothing to do with the ability to draw. But then what becomes of the drawing skill? What happens to the gift? Or, in the case of Barnes, what happens to the verbal virtuosity when it belongs to no ongoing project, no mission, when it has no steady work?

Barnes has seen it all, the tub-thumping novelistic traditionalism, the barrel-jumping experimentalism, the beery realism, the cool academicism: seen it, and seen through it. No conventions can warm him, no missions can stir him. Where he sees an enthusiasm, he suspects a folly. In *The New Yorker* recently he did a lovely little job on the latest British historical fetish, the maze, which is enjoying a resurgence in 1991, the



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Year of the Maze, and which is now almost obligatory for any country house or castle wanting to bring its antiquity up to date. So garden mazes are being planted all over his home country, and Barnes is icily scathing of all this "Heritage in the Making," the "instant classic, the cultural item no sooner created than lacquered and preserved."

He has bravely fought the false glamour of the instant classic. He has refused to repeat himself, pressing on to innovate, straining to find new ideas for novels. But that's just the problem, his problem and ours: the chronic restlessness, the itchy need to wear a new look, to speak a new rhythm, to buy new software to adorn the new hardware. This lust for the new is not itself new, but it is fair to say that when it first began to dominate art circles in the early part of this century, novelty had a different rhythm. Joyce, Woolf, Matisse broke their way into fresh creative air, but these were projects of innovation that could take a decade or more to culminate. Barnes, like many another, would like his new ideas to culminate once a year—or, as in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), once every thirty pages.

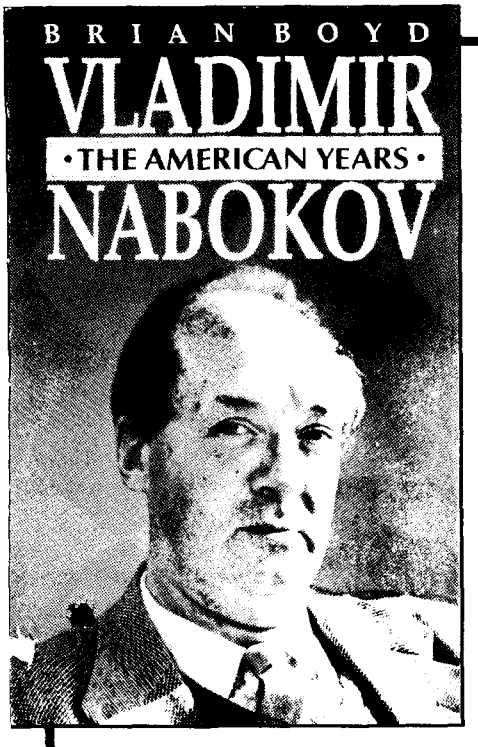
The big idea of that book was to work ingenious variations on Noah and the Ark, on themes of deluge, abandonment, wreckage, and recovery as they play themselves out through the centuries—much as the big idea of *Flaubert's Parrot* was to work variations on the mythology of Flaubert. If the latter book still glows, while the former fades, this is in large part because in Flaubert he found a passion to tether his straying wit. He could wander into parody, into cool private intellectualist fancy, but always he came back into orbit around his endless literary regard for Flaubert. In *A History of the World*, on the other hand, nothing resists the power of satire: all the human past, ancient and modern, believing and faithless, helplessly spreads out its follies.

In the author's note to *A History of the World* Barnes writes from London to thank some friends for "inspecting my American." The arch note is characteristic. It tells us how conscious Barnes is of his ventriloquism, of his habit of trying on the voices of exotic creatures who live far from his usual haunts: antiquarians, film actors, woodworms, victims of terrorism, Americans. He has spent most of the last decade devising unlikely plots that require ever more exacting forms of impersonation. He likes to do fanatics of any stripe: besotted lovers, fundamentalist astronauts, obsessed biographers. He prefers his characters haunted, while he himself remains unpossessed, dispassionate, sane, lucid, and free.

Barnes is a floater, in short, hovering above the world like some intelligent bubble, which occasionally descends for a time, assumes the shape of some desperate quester, and then drifts off to the next masquerade. The world, as it is painted on his canvas, is dotted with stormy individuals who lash and flail in their private adventures, solitary obsessives who keep their passions tucked away, invisible beneath their shells.

In *Talking It Over*, his new book, Barnes has invented the perfect form for this view of our species as a swarm of disconnected atoms, windowless and doorless. The novel's characters appear one after another, each taking their turn to talk at the reader, fondly known as "you." That they are locked in the misery of a love triangle only makes their sense of isolation more bitter. They come at "you," these voices, one at a time, mouthing their desires, their sorrows, until another hand grabs the microphone, and the sound changes: a new sob, a different rant, another joke.

So the title of the new book is a great irony, since talking it over is exactly what these people fail to do. All through Barnes's body of work, in fact, dialogue signally fails to occur. He can rarely muster more than a short conversational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sprint before he returns to the terrain where he is most at home: the frantic lonely gasps of the self-enclosed soul.

Stuart is an investment banker, Oliver is an underemployed aesthete and a teacher of languages, Gillian restores paintings. Stuart is dull, plodding, and earnest, Oliver is incandescent with wit, Gillian is reticent and deliberate. All are thirtysomething in Londonsomewhere. Stuart and Oliver are old though unlikely friends, the one ponderously faithful and well heeled, the other unrelievedly sparky and broke. A dating firm brings Stuart and Gillian together; they sup, they marry. Oliver, their boon companion, falls in love with Gillian, who resists but then accepts the heat of his affections. After a divorce, the new lovers marry; and more things go on, until they stop.

This is a hard book, hard to like, hard to discard, in large part because it never gives its people the chance to muddle their way into understanding. "That's the trouble with talking it over like this," says Gillian early on. "It never seems quite right to the person being talked about." Well, exactly. How could it seem right as long as this is what "talking it over" means: talking about someone else, some lover, some husband, some wife, in a chain of monologues that never lock into dialogue? It is all private yearning put into urgent speech, without the consolation of an answering voice.

In the best section of *A History of the World,* Barnes reflected on the view of human suffering represented in Géricault's *Scene of Shipwreck*: "There is no formal response to the painting's main surge, just as there is no response to most human feelings. Not merely hope, but any burdensome yearning: ambition, hatred, love (especially love)—how rarely do our emotions meet the objects they seem to deserve." The voice that says this may not be Barnes's authentic voice: there may be no such thing. But within the whole body of his work it seems the most steady, the quietest, the one he hears before he drifts into sleep. It is the one that goes on to say, "We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us."

If you hold such a view, it will not be surprising for you to pass fitfully from one desperate pose to another, or from one novelistic style to the next. Barnes has talent without conviction. (In this, he is certainly not alone.) What makes *Talking It Over* such an instructive book, if not a grand one, is that in it Barnes is thinking sharply about himself through the figure of Oliver, another homeless talent who has no beliefs that might keep him from flapping wildly in the wind. Barnes lavishes his cleverness on Oliver, and while he would certainly not want to be identified with his character's prancing, careening, soulless pleasures, he cannot keep himself cleanly apart.

It is Oliver's habit, in his own words, to "scatter *bons mots* like sunflower seeds." This is Barnes's own verbal reflex: when Oliver speaks, Barnes lets himself go. Then we get the unsheathed pen, the unloosed tongue, the darting, lashing, dare-to-say-anything whip of the high-stepping mind. This has its seductions. The brightest moments in *Talking It Over,* bright with a skeptic's glare, are those when Barnes just gives himself to witty violence and mocks with the mock of the Complete Unbeliever.

It is not for everyone, this irony that can shrivel anything; but no one should doubt that it is one of the temptations of our time. Things being as they are, "playful irony *au maximum,*" as Oliver calls it, can seem the last refuge from the scoundrels. But irony is endless in its appetites, and it is a sign of Barnes's desperate consistency that his irony turns back and devours itself. "He's clever," says Stuart of Oliver, "I've never denied that, but not clever enough to see that you have to be more than clever."

Being more than clever is what Barnes knows he ought to be; so through the person of Oliver he satirizes satire, ironizes irony, lacerates his wit, until that other value—love—rises in the ashes. When Oliver falls in love with Gillian, his best friend's new wife, and surrenders himself to the emotional surge, Barnes tests love as the antidote to irony. Oliver becomes love's modern apostle, who explains all of life in love's terms:

> *Love, etc.* The proposition is simple. The world divides into two categories: those who believe that the purpose, the function, the bass pedal and principal melody of life is love, and that everything else—*everything* else—is merely an *etc.*; and those, those unhappy many, who believe primarily in the *etc.* of life, for whom love, however agreeable, is but a passing flurry of youth, the pattering prelude to nappy-changing, but not something as solid, long-lasting, and reliable as, say, home decorations. This is the only division between people that counts.

That's not quite true, not true at least to the division that really cuts Barnes in two. Not love or domesticity, but love or irony: *that* is the choice that his fiction confronts at the end of the day, a choice between a pitiless emotion-corroding wit and a blindly blazing passion. The fate of Oliver, ironic aesthete turned haunted lover, stands for Barnes's fate: doubting everything, he yearns to love something.

But is it finally a choice at all, this alternative that Barnes obtrusively draws? His lovers, here and elsewhere, are so private, so driven from within, so self-propelled, that they are finally as lonely as his ironists. As *Talking It Over* moves to conclusion, its three characters are at once mutually fixated and invisible to one another. They conceal their resentments and longings. They harbor their secrets, and secrete their guilt. They plot in the unseen corners of their psyches.

When confidence that we can know, really know, one another grows weak, when other people seem to be only grinning robots, then it will seem that life is a stage-play. We all know the feeling. There is oneself and there are the distant unknowable spectators. Oliver, in a petulant mood, speaks to exactly this problem: "It can be a strain, you know, sensing the expectation out there in the hushed blackness. People are either performers or audience, aren't they? And sometimes I do wish the audience would try it out onstage just once." Perform, perform, is what Barnes himself feels he must do. He pouts and leers, laughs and weeps, changes his costume, changes his style, puts on his American accent, and works tirelessly, even frantically, to live up to his virtuosity.

Contrast is all. To live as an artist is to invent a difference. Similarity is boredom; identity is death. And what *Talking It Over* finally suggests is that, like art, love and friendship, too, live only through contrast and opposition. When the newly married Gillian and Oliver move to France, she notices the loss of some of his charm:

> He seemed terribly exotic when I first met him; now he seems less colorful. It's not just the effect of time and familiarity, either. It's that here the only English person he's got to set him off is me, and that's not really enough. He needed someone like Stuart around. It's like color theory. If you put two colors side by side, that affects the way you see them. It's exactly the same principle.

It is also the principle that keeps these characters permanently apart. They are conceived as essentially, irrevocably different. It is not for them to discover some common root, some shared pit. The most they can hope for is to arrange themselves in pleasing contrast, side by side, like red and blue.

As the novel talks its way toward climax, Oliver has his wish, though he doesn't know it: the audience—that is, his wife—tries it out onstage. Hoping to pay something back to her poor, baffled ex-husband Stuart, hoping to give his emotions some peace, Gillian digs and pokes



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at Oliver until he slaps her in the open street while—known to Gillian, not to Oliver—Stuart looks on from behind a hotel window. It is meant to even the score among the three, to right the balance on the emotional ledger. But the plan is not something that Gillian can tell Oliver, because "he'll turn it into a performance and it's got to be real." So she stages her provocation, and Oliver, forgetting love and irony, reacts like a brute.

I read this as a hint of what Barnes would like, or half-like, for himself. He would like to be fooled into confrontation with reality, tricked out of his self-consciousness, duped into stepping out of the performing self. But if this is what he would like, there is no sign that this is what he will get. The obligations of performance seem his deepest, most dire, duty. If he believes nothing else, he believes that a bravura metaphor, a single sudden stroke of the pen, will justify his labor and charm his audience.

So there he remains, isolated on the podium, stretching the bow of his virtuosity. It is affecting to imagine him, furrowing his brow, trying to dream up new novelties to surpass the old novelties. But it is exasperating, too. One wants to say, come down from there. How dare you think we have nothing in common. We are alone together.

MICHAEL LEVENSON is professor of English at the University of Virginia.

# *Capital Crimes*

**BY NICHOLAS LEMANN**

## Scandal: The Culture of Mistrust in American Politics by Suzanne Garment

**(Times Books, 335 pp., $23)**

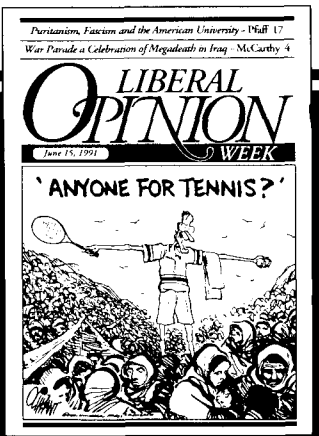
## Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics by Larry J. Sabato

**(Free Press, 306 pp., $22.95)**

Every time Washington concludes one of those recurring dramas in which attention is riveted for a week or two on a public official's infractions, everyone, including the key participants, seems to fall into a dazed, abashed, morning-after mood. What was *that* all about, they wonder in seminars at the Kennedy School, what powerful anthropological forces pulled me helplessly along as I feigned outrage in the committee room, or camped out on someone's lawn at 6 a.m., or, after reading a dozen op-ed pieces about a subject in three days, felt impelled to write one of my own? Even those few who defended "the process" during the Clarence Thomas hearings did so on single-issue grounds (saying, that is, that it was important to bring sexual harassment to the forefront of our consciousness), rather than arguing that we had just witnessed something majestic that should become a regular part of Supreme Court confirmations.

To say that most people now agree that these Washington hooplas have gotten out of hand, however, is not to make much headway in defining the problem precisely, or in figuring out how to solve it. I suspect that Suzanne Garment and Larry Sabato undertook their books out of a similar sense of annoyance at repeatedly seeing a big deal made of matters that were objectively not very important. But they define the basic phenomenon differently—Garment is impatient with ethics scandals, Sabato is disturbed by presidential-campaign media meltdowns—and otherwise agree on very little.

It is easy to feel disgusted with events like the Gary Hart-Donna Rice affair, or the long, expensive, inconclusive special prosecutor investigation into whether Hamilton Jordan did cocaine at Studio 54. It is harder to put that disgust into perspective. There are three quite distinct ways to characterize the problem that scandals and feeding frenzies exemplify. Some would argue that it's healthy to scrutinize the ethics and the "character" of public officials, but that the attention paid to these matters is wildly excessive and crowds more important concerns out of the public debate. Oth-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ers would say that the subject of the scandals, rather than their form, is the real problem: officials' personal lives, and minor lapses in their conduct that don't involve stealing or accepting bribes, are merely examples of universal human imperfection, and should not be on the public agenda. Finally, overblown Washington controversies might be understood as encoded power struggles, in which case the only way to quell them would be to delegitimize the people who instigate them.

Sabato seems to believe in the first and second characterizations, slightly modified, but not in the third, whereas Garment subscribes to all three versions without sorting them out very precisely. *Scandal* mostly takes the form of a series of long recaps of various Washington scandals of the 1980s, with newspaper stories as the chief research material. She is at her best when dealing with the indisputable excesses of scandal-hunters, as in their victimization of Theodore Olson, a figure in the Superfund scandal who endured three separate investigations spanning six years but was never charged with anything. When she is working from interviews rather than clippings—as she is in the best chapter, about the suffering that scandal victims go through—her work becomes noticeably more vivid, nuanced, and persuasive. It's finer-grained assessments of scandals that Garment's book is missing.

In her descriptions of scandals, she uses a tone of deadpan sarcasm that tends to stand in for analysis: we get recitations of facts behind which seems to lie the message, "Isn't it insane that this kind of penny-ante stuff attracts serious attention?" *Scandal* amply rewards those who share this sentiment wholeheartedly; for those who need persuading, however, its message is confusing, because there is a discordance between the tone of most of the book and its stated conclusion. In a late chapter, Garment divides sixty-three recent Washington scandals into categories of seriousness, and concludes that thirty of them involved "serious misconduct," while in only eight was there "no persuasive evidence of significant misconduct." In short, her tally suggests that the essential mission of the ethics-enforcement apparatus might be a useful one. And yet in the preceding 280 pages she has sounded like someone who identifies so strongly with the ethically accused that no scandal of the last two decades seems to have truly crossed her threshold of righteous outrage.

Even Watergate, the scandal that gave birth to the scandal era, doesn't seem to bother Garment too much. She acknowledges the Nixon administration's wrongdoing in the following tepid way: "After an almost decade-long game of mutual goading between defenders and opponents of the [Vietnam] war, it was the president's men who not only stepped over the lines and did the indefensible but got caught." The Keating Five scandal—in which five senators went to bat with regulatory agencies for a crooked savings and loan tycoon who had given them big campaign contributions—demonstrated, to her, "the gamut of destructive possibilities inherent in our modern political reforming impulse." The sweetheart deal in which Tony Coelho, the powerful Democratic representative who was in charge of shaking down corporations for the party, earned an instant $100,000 trading in Michael Milken's junk bonds "did not really add up to much on the wrongdoing scale."

Last May David Baltimore, the head of the Rockefeller Institute, finally admitted that a 1986 paper of which he was a co-author contained faked data. And yet Garment has a long, outraged section describing Representative John Dingell's investigation of the Baltimore case. In it she accuses Dingell of harboring "a deep animus against this country's scientific establishment" and says that the lesson of the Baltimore case is "that this type of scandal politics can also wreak damage on society as a whole." And the Iran-contra scandal wasn't really scandalous, Garment implies, because the legislative history of contra aid was so complicated that it was simply impossible for the executive branch to obey the law:

> When policy-makers bob and weave the way the congresspersons did on Nicaragua, they can be sure that the people on the ground carrying out the orders will resist the constant changes and that the people implementing policy will develop a certain amount of contempt for the authors of the confusion. Growing angry when things work out this way is about as morally impressive as railing at the law of gravity.

If Garment had been prepared to declare openly that the rules of official ethics are silly, *Scandal* would have been more consistent (though not completely persuasive). As it is, her hostility toward ethics-enforcers is so strong that she seems blindered—unwilling or unable to acknowledge that even the simplest and the most straightforward ethical standards might actually serve as useful guidelines for official behavior. Remember the case of Joseph Wright Jr., the deputy director of the Office and Management and Budget under David Stockman? He once called the Department of Energy to inquire about a case involving his father's oil company in Oklahoma (in which he owned stock). A typically overblown investigation followed, the premise of which, according to Garment, was that "high-ranking officials should stay off the telephone altogether."

One reason for Garment's obvious impatience with the proposition that ethical violations should be taken seriously and evaluated at face value is that to her the real issue is not ethics, but ideology. She sees the rise of ethics scandals in the 1970s as a byproduct of the rise of an elite of left-wing journalists, intellectuals, lawyers, and bureaucrats, who shared a "conviction that the people governing this country were fundamentally illegitimate in their claims to authority and criminal in their behavior." (Never mind that she has to rewrite some history to substantiate this view: according to Garment, anti-establishment sentiment made federal prosecutor jobs seem glamorous, so that "in the late 1960s some Supreme Court clerks finishing their terms began choosing the U.S. Attorney's office rather than prestigious private law firms for their next jobs." In fact, ever since Henry Stimson, Republican founder of the American Establishment, was a U.S. Attorney and surrounded himself with an adoring staff made up of the very best graduates of the very best law schools, elite federal prosecutor jobs have been a prized résumé-enhancer for young lawyers.)

## *Drought Year*

The orchard's on fire. This is literal—
turning, a new way. Not frost-snapped but dried
on the branch to tender kindling, fall leaves fly,
the air alight. The flame goes guttural
while he and I rush for water. All
for nothing: the bucket's rotted, the well gone dry,
a wilderness at our backs. Paradise
fallen under our care. He mutters, "Hell,"
metaphorical to the last. I'm put out.
The hair on my head rises to the flame;
my cheeks are burning. I know when I'm licked.
We'd left the trees untended, didn't doubt
we could recoup any time. Now we blame
the weather for the fruit that went unpicked.

**KATHARINE COLES**



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Garment goes further, proposing a specifically partisan motivation behind the scandal industry: when the Democrats lost control of the executive branch, they realized that they could use ethics as a way to regain some of the power they had lost in elections. "The ethics laws passed after Watergate," Garment writes, "were mainly meant to empower Democrats in Congress and put Republican presidents on a short political leash." This view oddly echoes some kind of Foucaultian reasoning about knowledge and power that conservatives generally regard with disdain. Garment sees the process of identifying and punishing infractions as a matter more of sociopolitical context than of right and wrong. She presents this argument in a facile way that seems to assume that assertion equals persuasion.

Garment is similarly assertive in her discussion of the net effect of all the scandals on the way Washington works. On the anti-scandal side of the ledger, she correctly points out that scandals encourage a self-protective blandness in memo traffic and cause some good people to avoid government service. More important, they engender a broad recasting of many policy issues as law-enforcement issues—which means they aren't debated sensibly. The savings and loan scandal is a good example. Congress (and to some extent the press too) would rather do almost anything than shoulder the burden of phasing out the Depression-era structure of the financial services industry, and it is convenient to be able to appear to be responding forcefully to the problem by finding miscreants to go after.

On the pro-scandal side, though, you'd think that the endless procession of scandals would have caused many people in government to alter their behavior. Washington has a much bigger lobbying and fund-raising apparatus than it did a generation ago, but the city is probably cleaner on the whole, too. It's difficult to imagine a congressional leader getting away with the kind of blatant use of an official position to get rich that Robert Caro has described Lyndon Johnson doing with his radio and television stations in Austin. Couldn't the existence of disclosure forms and ethics committees and Federal Election Committee records—and, even more, fear of the use that the press might make of these things—be partly responsible for the relative honesty of the federal government? Garment refuses to concede this. In the case of one part of the ethics superstructure, the office of the independent counsel (né special prosecutor), Garment makes an argument for abolition: regular prosecutors will do, she says, and once an independent counsel is appointed there is an automatic tendency to make too much of an allegation. But the overall feeling of *Scandal* is that she also hasn't got much use for all the other ethics-enforcement mechanisms, for which she doesn't propose specific reforms.

On the principle that the simplest possible explanation for a phenomenon, the one with the fewest exceptions, is the best explanation, I'd like to propose that what really drives the unwarranted attention given to minor Washington scandals is not political partisanship, and not the excessive strictness of the ethics laws, but the need for publicity. Good strict ethics laws are necessary and their mere existence does not guarantee that our public life will inevitably take the form of a series of investigations. It's certainly true that ideologues can exploit the ethics process, but they have other weapons at hand too. Robert Bork's confirmation hearings, which rank at the very top of conservatives' list of Washington horrors of the past decade, involved no tint of scandal. Anyway, the prominent Washington journalist or elected officeholder who is motivated primarily by ideology is a rare bird. The need for status is much more important, and in a pool of people not strongly distinguished from one


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another by title or rank (such as the press corps, or, in this day of the weakened seniority system, the House and the Senate), status is a function of prominence, which is measured in media appearances.

The ambitious members of Congress care much more about getting on television than they do about going to hunting lodges and golf courses with lobbyists, or getting cheap haircuts in the Capitol barbershop—or pursuing an ideological agenda. If anything, prominent Washington politicians now pretend to be more ideological than they really are (example: Newt Gingrich) because it's a good way to get publicity. When publicity is the coin of the realm in Washington, scandals are, in effect, the mint.

Whenever another "gate" hits Washington, the sense of communal joy is almost palpable. The nation's usually wandering attention is firmly fixed on the capital, which confirms the correctness of the career decisions made by thousands of student-body presidents who moved there on the assumption that Washington is the center of the world. In a city where (as Irving Kristol has observed) success is a zero-sum game because you can't get a prestigious slot unless someone else vacates it, the possibility that several occupants of high-ranking jobs might have to resign is profoundly thrilling. On Capitol Hill, no one ever gets as much publicity as the members of the crucial committee during such a crucial time. (After the Thomas hearings, every schoolchild in America was able to do a Howell Heflin imitation.) The pie expands greatly for television journalists, too, and in print regular front-page space opens up to people who aren't assigned to the usual big beats.

Life, in short, is exciting. An old Washington saw has it that once you've experienced life on the White House staff, everything else will seem slightly dull; and the same could be said about experiencing life during a "gate." Naturally most of the participants will want to recreate the experience, and ethics scandals are a pretty reliable way to do it—more reliable, anyway, than the passage of a major piece of legislation.

This would explain why ethics scandals and campaign brouhahas centering around a candidate's "gaffe," which in theory are completely different, feel so similar: both involve a total focus of Washington's attention on one objectively small point, and the rhythms, the emotions, and the giddy atmosphere are the same. The leering, frantic, rumormongering excesses of the press pack that seem to have moved Larry Sabato to write his new book occurred mostly during the 1988 presidential campaign, but if his words are different from Garment's, the tune is the same: public discourse is distorted, baseless charges are given far too much weight, public officials' lives are needlessly ruined. If the link between left-wing ideology and ethical rules is so crucial, as Garment says, then how come scandals and feeding frenzies, which are (according to Sabato) essentially non-ideological and often unrelated to ethics, are so much alike? And if the real problem is a periodic desperate need for publicity, can't we solve such a problem and still maintain our ethical rules without sacrificing the efficiency of the government?

Sabato believes that the current mood of the political press began to take form even before Watergate, with the Chappaquiddick scandal, which made the long-standing reporters' tradition of not writing about (not to mention participating in) the Booze-and-Broads side of politics seem like a dereliction of duty. Barely five years earlier, the White House press corps was assiduously covering up John F. Kennedy's sexual escapades. After Chappaquiddick, however, Edward Kennedy's adventures seemed like evidence of a "character problem" that voters needed to evaluate as they considered his suitability for the presidency.

The real watershed in campaign coverage, however, was the handling of President Ford's statement, in a presidential debate in 1976, that he didn't consider Poland a captive nation. Everybody knew what Ford meant; and yet there followed two weeks of absolutely disingenuous outrage about the grievousness of his error—which, Sabato says, may have led to Jimmy Carter's winning that close election. In subsequent campaigns, such incidents became as familiar as (actually, more familiar than) bunting and bumper stickers.

One evening during the feeding frenzy that followed the surprise choice of Dan Quayle as George Bush's running mate, two of the three networks led the news with stories about Paula Parkinson's upcoming pictorial in *Playboy* magazine and her vague comments about the famous weekend when she accompanied a congressman on a golfing jaunt on which Quayle was one of the guests. In another episode, Brett Kimberlin, a convicted drug smuggler and bomber, attracted some serious press attention—most recently in "Doonesbury"—with his unsubstantiated charge that he had been Quayle's drug dealer. (Kimberlin offered James Lewis, the "Tylenol killer," as a source for reporters who sought to confirm his story.) In the early stages of the Hart campaign in 1988, T. R. Reid of *The Washington Post* got the candidate to come pretty close to admitting on the record that he would consider raising taxes, and his editors buried this in a story with a lead saying Hart's opponents were spreading rumors about his sex life.

Often what gets these stories going is what Sabato calls a "subtext": a public figure has a reputation around Washington that the press can't find a way to report, so when the opportunity presents itself a frenzy ensues. Hart was known as a skirt-chaser, John Tower as a drunk, Quayle as a dumb bunny, Michael Dukakis as a tightly wound watch-spring of a man: hence the overemphasis on Hart's affairs, Tower's barroom escapades, Quayle's college grades, and Dukakis's mental health. Sabato is also right to point out that without laying out the ground rules explicitly, the press reacts to social changes by holding up presidential candidates to ever shifting moral tests. In 1964, at a time when adultery was winked at, Nelson Rockefeller's divorce helped to give Barry Goldwater the Republican nomination. Today, due to the influence of feminism, among other things, it's perfectly OK that Bob Kerrey is divorced, but it won't be OK if the long-married Bill Clinton turns out to be adulterous.

Sabato has done a lot of research for this book, including dozens of interviews with working journalists. He accurately portrays the motivations of the people that he criticizes in a way that Garment never does. (He also purveys some good gossip, presumably just for the sake of the advancement of social science: I hadn't known that one of JFK's top aides had a child out of wedlock while serving in the White House, or that Douglas Ginsburg's marijuana-smoking past was brought to light by a vengeful ex-girlfriend.) He understands the rationale behind journalists' refusal to apply the brakes once a story they know is crazy is under way: competitive pressure, invocations of the larger themes the story is thought to illuminate, and the argument that they're only doing their job all come into play. The mood in the middle of a feeding frenzy is a strange mix of adrenaline, a desire to break a monster story, and a fear of being accused later of having failed to take seriously something that turned out to be very important. It is the kind of thrilling anxiety that can be addictive.

If the press treated minor ethical violations and political figures' misstatements and early-life screw-ups with the same gravity as, say, changes of govern-



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ment in Latin American countries or vast economic shifts in American society (which is to say, no more than dutifully), everything would be fine. Sabato's problems would be solved, and so would most of Garment's. Ethics probers on Capitol Hill would be much more restrained if their oxygen supply of publicity were limited: if you've ever attended a congressional hearing at which only the trade press is present, then you know that the get-me-out-of-here look in the eyes of the committee members is unmistakable.

The question is how to encourage this change in the behavior of the press. The big-time daily press is in an odd position today. On one hand, it is much more powerful than a generation ago, because the United States has become an information society and authority-wielding "intermediate structures" (neighborhood, extended family, church, local political machine) have declined. On the other hand, just as social changes have bolstered the daily press, technological changes have hurt it severely. Cable television has made the basic package of hard news available to everyone through channels other than the traditional big news organizations, whose basic role has been badly eroded. It's hard to think of any big national news medium except CNN that is in an expansive, Manifest Destiny mood today.

So it is quite unclear what the big-time press—now affluent, college-educated, and puissant—is supposed to do, exactly. Feeding frenzies happen in part because the press feels it should be exercising its new power somehow, but it does not have a clear sense of mission. In the past, when one occupation had an enhanced role in the society, and was often accused of abusing its new power, calls for its professionalization were soon heard: requiring graduate education and licensing would bring the field's prestige up to the level of its influence and would also, by limiting access, stabilize the economic situation of its members. Fortunately, the First Amendment makes it likely that journalism will be able to dodge this bullet, and remain open and lively.

A better cure is for journalists to broaden their notion of what constitutes the news. The lesson of Watergate was supposed to be that reporters should shun the traditional beats, with their quasi-stenographic daily grind, and spend their time in the lonely, lengthy pursuit of stories they think are important. But the allure of the White House press room and the presidential campaigns, with their camaraderie and their promise of daily access to space on the front page, hasn't really diminished.


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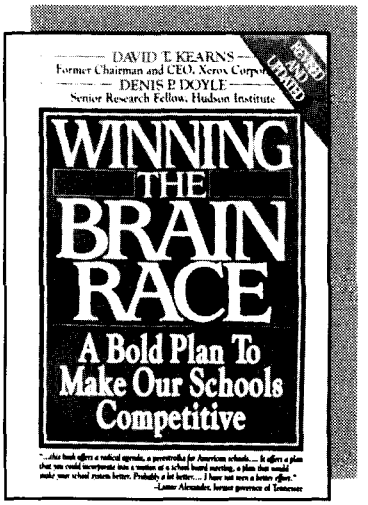
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Now we have reporters trying to be sleuths at spectacles—imagining (to steal a line from Charles Peters) that they are emulating Bob Woodward when they ask tough questions while covering the Republican National Convention. A feeding frenzy like the one surrounding Quayle's nomination is almost inevitable when you have thousands of reporters who think of themselves as aggressive, as "players," committed to covering a non-story.

Sabato would not agree. He wishes that broadcasters would give "viewers more, not less, information about politics." He wants the networks to bring back Bill Moyers-style commentary on the evening news, to turn their backs on "happy talk" and Q ratings, and to continue to report exhaustively (but responsibly!) on "character" issues in presidential campaigns. I'm skeptical: parts of the political beat, like the conventions, are now a non-story best left to CNN and C-SPAN, and as long as you have an extreme overcommitment of journalistic resources to a tiny handful of venues like the campaign trail and the White House, you are asking for trouble.

The real answer to the feeding frenzy problem would be to change the reward structure of journalism and add to the prestige of other kinds of coverage. This wouldn't be as difficult as it sounds. Market forces are no longer driving the big news organizations in the direction of more presidential and presidential-aspirant coverage—traditional Washington-political news tends to be box-office poison these days. A few relatively small changes, like the addition of a Pulitzer Prize in explanatory journalism, or a decision by *The New York Times* to devote more of its front page to non-political stories, can have an immense effect on what journalists do. Vast areas of American life—ethnicity, deindustrialization, urban geography—go essentially uncovered by the big-time national press, and if a few prominent reporters begin to explore these areas and produce work that wins admiration, more will follow. (The best example of the way in which a single breakthrough work can alter the entire practice of journalism is the still-palpable effect of Theodore White's *The Making of the President 1960* on campaign coverage.)

One advantage for journalists of covering scandals is that it allows them to engage in the obvious exercise of their newly enhanced power without taking on power's ordinary burdens. Scandal coverage can be at least rationalized as being passive and non-judgmental, even though it really isn't. We're just reporting the story everyone else is reporting, runs the familiar justification; we're just seeking out violations of the law (that is, of rules made by others), not independently evaluating official performance. The truth is, though, that to play the social role that is now supposedly the ideal of journalism—that of the tough, persistent, fearless bringer of issues to the nation's attention—requires exercising some independent judgment about what's important. There isn't any right way for 5,000 reporters to cover the conventions, or the Iran-contra hearings, or the scandals—except to walk away and go cover something else.

NICHOLAS LEMANN is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and the author of *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (Knopf).

# *The Big Easy*

**BY JAMES J. CRAMER**

## Den of Thieves by James B. Stewart

**(Simon and Schuster, 493 pp., $25)**

## Eagle on the Street by David A. Vise and Steven Coll

**(Scribners, 395 pp., $24.95)**

## Inside Out: An Insider's Account of Wall Street by Dennis B. Levine with William Hoffer

**(Putnam's, 352 pp., $22.95)**

Most of Wall Street doesn't have much nostalgia for the '80s. Despite a fantastic bull market with a phenomenal tripling of the Dow Jones averages, the past ten years will be remembered not for the wealth of the many, but for the greed of the few. Rather than unbridled enthusiasm for a capitalist machine that straightened itself out triumphantly, no matter how hard we tried to tinker, rig, or overleverage it, the prevailing feeling is a desire to bury the decade and hope that its legacy of excess doesn't wreck a fragile economy.

Three new books confirm the popular picture of the '80s as a giant swindle. Dennis Levine's self-exculpatory memoir scrambles to portray the period and his ugly role in the insider trader scandals in a positive light, but his exertions thoroughly backfire. David Vise and Steven Coll's rather flat examination of the Securities and Exchange Commission's role during the era portrays the regulators as blind to the machinations of America's freshly deregulated markets. And in a fascinating account of the creation and the destruction of the men who tried to manipulate the world's biggest market, James B. Stewart provides the most damning evidence yet compiled about why there will be no heroes among the '80s moneymen. Stewart's book is a masterpiece of its kind—not least because it also gives reason to hope, since virtue and selfless labor do not go unrewarded in his thorough account. Despite the immense fortunes of the evildoers and their almost unlimited ability to influence public opinion, a group of overworked and heretofore faceless government prosecutors ultimately won. It's a David and Goliath story, except that the p.r. is all on Goliath's side. The enforcers rescued from obscurity by Stewart are real heroes in a pretty heroless time.

Vise and Coll's book should have provided the perfect context for the scandals, since the enabling condition of all that went wrong on Wall Street in the '80s was the massive deregulation of the financial community ordered by the White House in 1981. The authors set the scene well: we watch as feared SEC regulator Stanley Sporkin steps down, and Wall Street insider John Shad takes over and starts dismantling Sporkin's oversight apparatus. The governing theme of the book is clear: a fox, Shad, a former E.F. Hutton executive, guards the Reaganite henhouse. But Vise and



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Coll are trapped by the journalist's beat mentality: covering Shad, they fall for him and lose sight of the larger story.

In fact, Shad was largely a sideshow player. Vise and Coll repeatedly argue that it was Shad's excessive respect for Wall Street personalities that duped him into thinking they couldn't be involved in massive wrongdoing, but the authors never stop to explain how it would have [illegible]attened if Shad had been more skeptical. Would the manipulations of Boesky, Milken, and Company never have occurred if Sporkin had stayed on? Unlikely, since Sporkin's focus was corporate wrongdoing in the boardroom, not the marketplace. Would the big takeovers and concomitant insider trading have been stopped by a more effective regulator? Alas probably not, since the SEC has no jurisdiction to prevent takeovers, per se. That power lies with Congress. There *is* a terrific account of a blown SEC investigation of Milken years before the real thing: we see Shad struggling to lash out against the overleveraging of America's corporate balance sheets, only to retreat at the behest of his shallow free marketeer staff economist. But finally the book is a prisoner of the Beltway, an account of a decade in which all of the action took place 220 miles to the north and 3,000 miles to the west.

At least Levine knows where the action is. But he seems to know not much else. His book presents itself as an insider's account of Wall Street, but it is only an apologia, a feeble attempt to make Levine's career look more important to Wall Street and less culpable to future clients. Stripped of all insider trading legalese and all the blather of '34 Act violations, Levine is an ordinary run-of-the-mill crook, a guy who stole from his employers—including Citicorp, Shearson, Smith Barney, and most of all Drexel—and from a host of innocent shareholders. His preposterous sense of his own importance gets comically in the way of his efforts at self-exoneration. He would have been wiser to admit that he really was only a minor leaguer who made major league insider trades.

Naturally he makes the point that "because everybody was doing it," and because "it didn't hurt anybody," his crimes were not significant. And he does his best to paint the Bahamian bankers who gave his name to the SEC as the real villains of the piece, because they violated foreign bank secrecy rules—as if the issue is the rules that protect criminal behavior, not the laws that punish wrongdoing. Still, Levine's book is important because it shows how unrepentant even convicted Wall Streeters can be about their sins and about the amoral lifestyles that prevailed. These gentlemen don't seem to mind that the nation's well-being is hurt by scandals that rock financial markets.

For, although it's difficult to measure, capital clearly flows to whatever market presents the best and fairest opportunity to profit. The American market still thrives because it is perceived as fair and honest. Consider, however, the fate of Japan's stock market. As long as it had the veneer of honesty, it grew rapidly; but the recent trading scandals have had a drastic effect on that nation's capitalist mechanism. While almost the whole world has enjoyed a fabulous bull market this year, Japan's market has languished some 15,000 points below its highs, a victim of massive outflows of foreign capital. In the time since the scandals began unfolding, Japan's total equity value has gone from 109.9 percent of GNP to 69 percent of GNP, almost entirely because portfolio managers worldwide want nothing to do with a market that looks rigged.

Moreover, Levine's repeated assertion that everybody was trading on non-public information is simply false. A few traders were doing it in disproportionately large amounts, which led to massive piggy-backing by others, but once the SEC did clamp down on the bad apples, insider trading dried up on Wall Street: almost every takeover in the last two years, including giant deals like MCA and NCR, has seen little pre-bid run-up because of insider trading. If insider trading was really as endemic as Levine makes it out to be, the few showcase prosecutions of the '80s would not have made that much of a dent in the practice.

Levine stubbornly hews to the party-line view of his last employer, arguing that the government's campaign against Milken was wrong-headed and misplaced. According to Levine, Milken is a gentle, hard-working soul, drawn into vile derring-do by that evil Master of the Universe Ivan Boesky. If only Ivan had not suckered Mike into his orbit, the blissful '80s juggernaut would still be with us. Levine, in short, is himself just another cog in the extraordinary Milken p.r. machine, peddling the familiar defense. It is, needless to say, a thoroughly unpersuasive defense; the notion that junk bond takeovers and leverage buyouts are good for the economy crumbles in the face of the massive bankruptcies and layoffs left in their wake.

It is Stewart's account, which locates the origin of the crookedness in Drexel's Beverly Hills office, that will stand as the definitive history of the financial depre-


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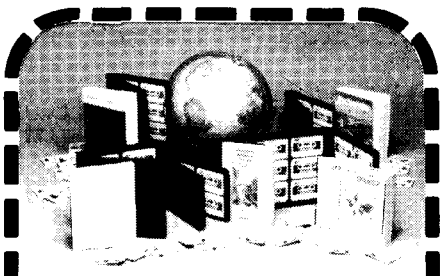

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dations of the decade. *Den of Thieves* provides details of manipulations that will jolt even the most knowing observers of the period. I thought I had heard pretty much all there was to know about the insider trading that went on one floor above me when I worked at Goldman Sachs, but Stewart has unearthed new proof of the sheer audacity of the wrongdoing that has even senior Goldman people buzzing. And people at Lazard Frères and Kidder Peabody, not to speak of former executives of Drexel, are said to be similarly wide-eyed.

Stewart sets out to chronicle the lives of all the major financial criminals, and he succeeds in virtually entering into the psyches of the wrongdoers themselves. What could possibly have motivated a multimillionaire star of the community like Martin Siegel to score additional hundreds of thousands of dollars by giving away secrets? The psychology, as Stewart depicts it, is thoroughly, sadly, fascinatingly believable: among other things, a desperate need to satisfy his wife's expensive tastes and a desire to avoid his father's financial straits. The story of Siegel's fall is almost novelistically riveting, as he is hunted ruthlessly by the feds, who badger him first with frightening phone calls and letters, and finally force his capitulation in a tumult of embarrassment before his lawyers, his friends, and even his wife.

Stewart skillfully creates a single and extremely complicated chronological narrative, first establishing the crimes as they were committed and experienced by the wrongdoers (or their associates, where the principals declined to be interviewed), and then, in the second part of his book, portraying the hunt, through the eyes of the prosecutors and the defenders, both in and out of the courtroom. *Den of Thieves* presents for the first time a clear view of what these criminals actually did. In Levine's case, this is easily done: having performed poorly as an investment banker, he created a vast network of low-level insiders who gave him tips from virtually every major firm. The Boesky case was pretty cut and dried, too. He paid insiders directly for information, and when it was clear that he might be found out, he turned himself in and spared us the claims of innocence.

But Milken's massive crimes are not so easy to document. Since no trial was ever occasioned by his activities, and since those activities were never as simple as those of Levine or Boesky, Milken has so far somehow managed to come off as less culpable than other, much less significant wrongdoers. From Stewart, however, we now know that Milken was at the center of a vast criminal enterprise capable of corrupting the entire stock and corporate bond markets. By systematically bilking many of the dumber institutions with which he did business, Milken skimmed billions from a network of insurance companies, savings and loans, and corporate pension plans.

Of course, not everybody fared badly. Milken made sure that the principals of important corporations with a proclivity to influence public opinion did well. He also saw to it that important money managers personally benefitted from his dealings, even as their fiduciaries lost out. He practiced his criminality daily, on many levels, from stashing hundreds of millions of dollars meant for stockholders into private family partnerships, to cutting side deals with important traders that let him in on the profits of leaked insider information from Drexel's "secret" takeover plans.

Stewart is virulent about Milken's defenders. Arthur Liman, Paul Weiss's most high-profile litigator, seems downright foolish in his elaborate protestations of Milken's innocence, coupled with an insidious public relations campaign designed to remake Mike into a saint of capitalism. It is true that Liman certainly made his share of mistakes along the way toward Milken's whopping ten-year sentence, but Stewart's assumption that Liman could have done something differently with his ruthless and guilty-as-sin client may be unwarranted. Should Liman not have bothered to give Milken a defense? Was the client too guilty to deserve the lawyer's best? Anyway, Milken originally retained the late Edward Bennett Williams for his defense, and it was Williams, not Liman, who was the architect of the hard-core defense that kept everybody connected with the case "in the tent pissing out instead of outside the tent pissing in." Liman inherited the scorched-earth, obstructionist, almost Mafia-like strategy from Williams when he died, and it was this adversarial temerity that ultimately caused the government to pursue Milken so vociferously.

Stewart's book is not only a work of reportage verging on history; it has itself had an impact on the saga, which continues. Without this book—and with yarns like Levine's—an uncontrite Milken might have gotten away with his galling strategy of pleading guilty in court and innocent to the press. Not surprisingly, the Milken propaganda machine has attacked Stewart's book in its typical backfiring way. You'd think that his defenders would have learned from their repulsive effort to prevent the publication of Connie Bruck's *Predator's Ball*: overnight their heavyhandedness vaulted a quiet business book from obscurity to the best-seller list. This time the Milken machine, no longer directed from the X-shaped desk on Rodeo Drive but from a federal prison cell in Pleasanton, California, has chosen not to debase the First Amendment. Instead, it has found an equally scurrilous but no more effective method of smearing an honest reporting of events. A series of newspaper ads by Alan Dershowitz, who is Milken's newest gun, has attempted to discredit both the book and its author on old grounds and new.

This is quite a turnabout for Dershowitz, who was vociferously anti-Milken before he was signed on as a retainer. On three occasions, a *New York Times* article, a *Washington Post* interview, and a *Newsday* op-ed piece, Dershowitz applauded Milken's conviction as a victory for the little guy. He even insisted that the court had been too lenient to Milken. "A pretty good deal for a man who has admitted that he willfully broke the laws designed to protect vulnerable investors," was how he described the sentence that he is now trying to overturn.

The old ground of the Dershowitz defense is that Boesky was the center of the evil, while Milken, an innovator and a crusading fighter against Wall Street's old guard, a builder, not a schemer, played a peripheral role. He also blames the media for distorting Milken's role and says he didn't know the facts of the case when he condemned him. Dershowitz suggests that there was nothing wrong with a trade that Stewart cites in his book, and that therefore Stewart is guilty of mistakes in everything he writes and Milken is innocent of crime in everything he did. Honest people can disagree, of course, about the particulars of this trade; it was put in the book, it seems, principally because it is one of the few examples where there were witnesses to both ends of the phone call when sensitive information was passed on. But honest people cannot stand by idly when Dershowitz shifts to the new ground of the Milken defense: that Stewart, and his book, is anti-Semitic.

The basis of Dershowitz's thoroughly shabby allegation is that Stewart mentions the religions of some of the wrongdoers. But anyone familiar with Stewart's work knows that it is scrupulous, particularly about delicate matters like ethnic labeling. Time and again during the period when Stewart was breaking story after story about these insider infidels for *The Wall Street Journal*, he was careful to avoid any characterizations unless prompted by the individuals themselves.



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His book is no different. Almost all of the religious references (and they are very few in a very large book) come from the quotes of the Jews he interviewed.

Of course, much is still at stake for Milken, even after his incarceration: most notably, the multibillion-dollar civil lawsuit the government has brought against him to recoup the money taken illegally from his savings and loan clients. And there is the matter of history itself, which now threatens to undo years and millions of dollars' worth of publicity designed to cast Milken in a positive light. Perhaps that is why the otherwise saintly Milken would authorize such an ugly and inflammatory defense. If Dershowitz can somehow distract attention away from Milken's crimes and toward Stewart's motivations, if the general American climate of absolution on ethnic and racial grounds can now be imposed upon Milken's story, then maybe more of these ill-gotten gains can be kept and Milken can start pleading innocent again when he's sprung from Pleasanton. But the ploy won't work, not least because Stewart's book will forever stand in its way. Owing to *Den of Thieves*, we now know the truth about the Milken criminal empire. Now and forever he will be as guilty in the court of public opinion as he was in the federal courthouse.

JAMES J. CRAMER is president of Cramer & Co., a New York investment firm.

## CORRESPONDENCE *continued from page 3*

**To the editors:**

I find it curious that Barry Edelstein criticizes Senators Simpson, Leahy, and Byrd for quoting from Shakespeare largely on the ground that neither they nor Clarence Thomas sufficiently resembles the quoted characters of Iago, Gertrude, Cassius, or Edmund. Does this mean, in attempting to soften someone's heart, that I cannot quote from Portia's "The quality of mercy" speech from *The Merchant of Venice* without insinuating that I'm an anti-Semite?

ARVIN COPELAND
*Houston, Texas*

## Vigilance

**To the editors:**

You have taken exception to my appearance before an organization you have classified as anti-Semitic (Notebook, November 4). Your description of Liberty Lobby may be accurate, but I have also spoken to Hadassah, synagogue men's clubs and sisterhoods, the NAACP, labor unions, business organizations, pro-lifers, pro-choicers, and anybody else from far left to far right interested in free and open political discourse.

Both in and out of Congress, I always found that most reasonable Americans reject the notion that speaking to somebody you disagree with must carry the stigma of guilt by association. The Council for the National Interest, incidentally, advocates a U.S. military guarantee of Israel's borders following a land for peace settlement. I know you're feeling all out of sorts after your recent defeat on the $10 billion Israeli loan guarantee, but calling your political adversaries anti-Semitic is one good example of why you lost.

DAVID R. BOWEN
*Washington, D.C.*

The writer, a former U.S. representative from Mississippi, is executive director of the Council for the National Interest.

## Dead poetry society

**To the editors:**

As one who holds an advanced degree in literature, I hope Joseph Brodsky ("An Immodest Proposal," November 11) can find a volume's worth of recent American poems that are not: (*a*) mere exercises in form; (*b*) obsessed with victimization; or (*c*) written primarily to impress fellow English professors and the tenure committee.

I sure can't.

ALLEN SMALLING
*Chicago, Illinois*

## TRB *continued from page 4*

back to 1965, but really started under President Nixon in 1969. Over the next twenty-three years, Republicans have controlled the White House for all but four. Virtually the entire affirmative action apparatus consists of executive orders, not legislation. It could be revoked by any president. Yet it hasn't been, by Nixon, Ford, Reagan, or Bush.

"I say again today that I support affirmative action," said Bush in signing the Civil Rights Act. Then what, exactly, does he oppose? Reverse discrimination? Quotas? What's the difference? Any form of official preference for minorities or women denies "equal opportunity" to similarly situated white males. It makes no difference—in principle or in practical effect—whether the policy is an explicit quota or some less precise form of favoritism in the selection process or even mere "recruitment and training." If you wish to oppose reverse discrimination as a matter of sacred precept, fine. But you cannot hide behind some purportedly acceptable practice called affirmative action. And there will be no Joshua Smiths contributing $90,000 to your re-election campaign.

Bush is constantly falling off the high horse of his alleged colorblind principles. Recently he ordered the Justice Department to reverse its position in a Supreme Court case. The question was whether the Constitution requires equal funding of traditionally black state colleges even after all state colleges are open to all races. Justice said no, Bush said yes, now Justice says yes. In oral arguments, Solicitor General Kenneth Starr (swallowing hard, perhaps) maintained that Mississippi's traditionally white schools remain biased against blacks because they use standardized admissions tests on which blacks don't do as well. A reasonable argument, in my view, but fairly striking from an administration that has made such a hoo-haw against so-called "race-norming" of standardized tests.

There is a Republican pattern of running for and winning office on the basis of appealing absolute principles, which they are quite correctly unwilling to practice once office has been achieved. No dealing with terrorists and hostage-takers. Smaller government and lower taxes. Colorblindness. Democrats are left holding the unappealing, though truer, position of "But ... but ... but ... but it's more complicated than that." Democrats lose and Republicans then govern on the basis that it is, indeed, more complicated than that. But they still get credit in the public mind for the appealing principle.

In the case of government-sponsored reverse discrimination, this is a policy that implicates Republicans at least as much as Democrats. It is a policy that George Bush could virtually abolish with the stroke of a pen. I dare him.

**MICHAEL KINSLEY**


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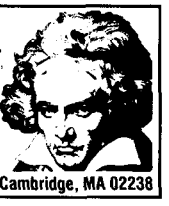

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# TOKYO DIARIST

## East of Eden

IT'S NO LONGER P.C. TO SAY "FAR East" (far from what? you see), so that's not where I am. I write from Tokyo at the end of a two-week trip to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, which is to say "East Asia." This terminological revision follows precisely from the facts: these societies are not defined by their remoteness from (or proximity to) anywhere else. Their peoples know they're at the epicenter of the dynamic processes of our time—something that cannot be said, for example, of the societies at the other end of the continent in what is still, without complaint, referred to as the Middle East. The economic achievements of Japan are legend. But even Hong Kong and Taiwan—small places with populations less than those of a medium American state—rank around fifteenth among the world's top trading countries. Calvinist capitalism has at last met its match in the strains of Buddhism—Jodo shinshu and shingaku—which emphasize work as a calling. The countries with this spiritual dispensation have achieved both wealth and the prerequisites of democracy. Still, they are only at the beginning of truly modern odysseys. What they'll make of their possibilities it's too early to tell. All we do know is that the great Communist experience in China—the other way—was like the fraternal episodes in Eastern Europe, a desolating and costly catastrophe. From this side of the planet, those long Cambridge evenings full of talk of the latest apologetics of Edgar Snow and Felix Greene and Han Suyin seem particularly parochial. How thrilling the revolution was from zip code 02138!

I'D HAD TNR BUSINESS TO DO IN this area for some time but didn't decide to go until Yo-Yo Ma—the most expressive and exacting cellist of the era—asked if I'd accompany him on his Asian concert tour. His audiences are not-a-whisper attentive, intense, slow to enthusiasm. By halfway through the performance, however, they are transformed, exuberant, freed. They're musically open too. Of course, the programs featured the usual crowd-pleasers: Bach and Brahms, Dvořák and Rachmaninoff, and also more "foreign" works of Stravinsky, Gershwin, Copland. But when Yo-Yo played Tod Machower's bold sonata for cello and computer "hyperinstruments," the audience did not have to struggle to see its beauty. Even the instruments are treated with honor. Yo-Yo's accompanist tells me that the pianos are revered. They must be loved, she says, unlike those in the great concert halls of the West, which are merely tuned. This life with music reaches into echelons equally rare in the West. A Toshiba executive I met was also a cellist. He spoke knowledgeably about Fournier and Jacqueline Du Pré, Janos Starker and Matt Haimowitz, and played a very respectable saraband from Bach. He's also the president of a symphony orchestra of Toshiba workers. Imagine a similar venture at Chrysler.

BUT THERE ARE strange dichotomies as well. A Kabuki performance by Tamasaburo, the premier exponent of this delicate art, seemed to make all who watched somewhat gentler. But at the stands where posters of the star were sold, people elbowed one another with a nasty abandon for what was clearly no short supply, as if battling for food to feed children during a famine. The cities are clean, it's true. But they're also ugly, their drabness relieved only by a jungle of neon at night. No culture I know seems more protective of its architectural past than the Japanese, and cares less for its future. It's true that, as in Hong Kong, Tokyo has erected some dazzling cathedrals of commerce. But save for these, the dreary is the norm. There is the ready alibi of the Allied bombings. But Kyoto was protected by a special warrant of FDR's, and its visual dreariness (punctuated by Zen, Shinto, and Tokugu treasures) beggars description. The cities remain magnets to the young. But this means vertical existence, where, like the American mausoleums that bury the dead vertically, the living work, sleep, and eat in tiny spaces far from the earth. And, as we know, they work incredibly hard. A symbolic judgment on such regimens is now being sought in a Japanese court where the family of a man is suing his employer for working him to death. This is not the first of such trials. Still, a social contract binds. You can leave your luggage in a public space without fear that it'll be stolen. Tokyo, the cliché goes, is L.A. without the crime. Well, L.A. on stilts.

IT'S NOT JUST IN HONG KONG THAT one hears about the capitalist transformation of southern China, especially Guangdong. For years it seemed reasonable to expect that Beijing would ultimately conquer Taiwan. And Britain had long decided to acquiesce to the "inevitable" in Hong Kong. But what may actually be happening is the gradual conquest of China by its tiny neighbors. It would be the final irony, wouldn't it, if the redoubts of the old order became the agents of change; the place where communism had staked its claim on the future. Maybe for this reason, those who live in Hong Kong and Taiwan counsel America to be patient with the Communist regime's autocracy. A rupture with China would only strengthen Japan's role in the region, they say. Their advice, of course, is undermined by their comfort with autocracy themselves. (The form you have to file on arriving in Taiwan must be like the one that welcomed visitors to Bulgaria before the Fall.) But their demonization of Japan is not about principle. It's about commercial competition—between themselves and Japan. And that's not something that should be the premise of American foreign policy.

MY ASSISTANT IN WASHINGTON had insisted we visit the Katsura Imperial Villa in Kyoto. But getting admitted requires permission from the Imperial Household Agency in Kyoto itself. After several unrequited faxes she called the agency, only to be connected with someone who knew enough English to say he knew none. The fates intervened: overhearing this constricted conversation at the Kyoto end, a young American graduate student offered to translate and make our reservations, which he did. It turns out he is on a fellowship from Harvard, where I teach and with which Yo-Yo is multiply affiliated. When we arrived, he was our guide, and not just to the must-sees, which, by the way, Katsura is. Late one night after a performance of the Dvořák Cello Concerto, we followed our new friend into the Higashiyama mountain to a deserted temple where two handfuls of Americans and Japanese were jamming on an odd combination of Western and Oriental instruments. And what sounds were they making? Klezmer sounds or, as an aging hippie put it to us, "Hassidic blues funk." At home abroad.

**MARTIN PERETZ**



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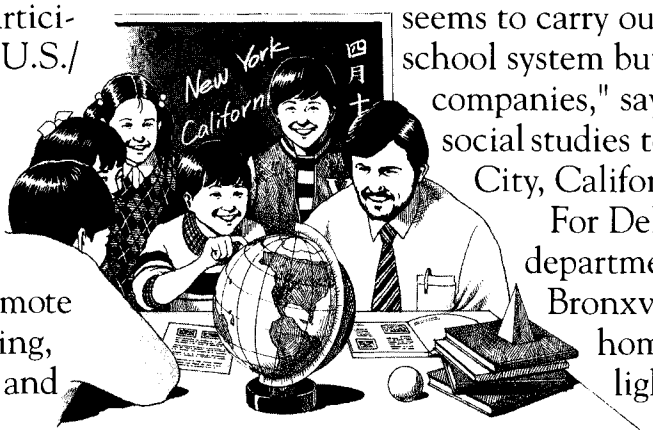
# Japan and America: Where the Twain Meet

"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," Kipling wrote long ago, and even today that saying sums up the feelings of many Americans and Japanese toward each other. But William Brinker, a high school social studies teacher from Farmington Hills, Michigan, disagrees. "The gulf between our cultures exists, but it can be bridged. We just have to work harder at understanding one another."

Brinker was a participant in the annual U.S./Japan Teachers Exchange Program sponsored by Hitachi. Now in its fourth year, this exchange helps promote mutual understanding, cultural awareness, and friendship between our societies on a personal level.




Since 1987, the program has sponsored the visits of 16 American teachers to Japan and five Japanese to the United States. Last year saw the largest exchange so far: four American and three Japanese teachers. For three weeks, they toured the sites, taught children, and lived in the homes of their hosts. For most, it was their first direct exposure to the culture they had so often taught about. Even for Brinker, who had spent time in Japan 36 years ago as a serviceman, the experience was eye-opening. "I came away with a much better understanding of the Japanese people," he says.

As teachers, the American visitors were struck by the way Japanese parents support the school system and the respect students show in the classroom. "The support and love of the family seems to carry out not only in the school system but also into their companies," says Greg Alvarado, a social studies teacher from Daly City, California.

For Delia Grogan-Selby, a department chairperson from Bronxville, New York, the home stay was a highlight of her visit. "I felt like I had parachuted into my own family, but it was Japan," she says.

Hitachi is proud to sponsor the U.S./Japan Teachers Exchange Program. We believe its positive impact will multiply as returning teachers share their personal experiences with students, colleagues, and friends at home.

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